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## The Marriage Yoke



# The Marriage Yoke

BY  
**ARABELLA KENEALY**  
AUTHOR OF

"Dr. Janet of Harley Street," "The Love of Richard Herrick,"  
"A Semi-Detached Marriage," "Charming Renée,"  
"His Eligible Grace the Duke,"  
etc., etc.

*"Behold, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed"*

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## THE MARRIAGE YOKE.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### THE HOSPITAL.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation.

NURSE BRAEBURN awoke to the clanging of a bell. Mechanically, with that instinct which is the momentum of habit, she slipped out of bed, and laying a hand unerringly upon the box of matches on her dressing-table, she struck one and lighted the single gas-jet in her room.

The light swept through her but half-opened heavy eyelids, and rending the last filmy curtain of sleep, flooded her brain with consciousness. In a moment she remembered that this day was not to be as other days.

The bell ceased from clanging. Its last harsh stroke jarred like a reproach. The profound silence muffling the mental echo of its clangour sounded like a knell. One of its accustomed flock had fallen out of the ranks. She would never again, it might be, voice her "Adsum" to its call.

She stood for a moment motionless, with the stricken sense of one who awakes in a desert to find himself abandoned by his fellows. For an instant she was obsessed by an impulse to take to her feet and follow after.

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The tiny ticking of her watch recalled her. She lifted it to the light and looked into its white familiar face. As women's watches frequently are (perhaps because they are as frequently cheap and inferior), it was fast. The hands showed some ten minutes in advance of the six o'clock bell for the nurses' uprising. Even by its careless time-keeping she would not need to begin dressing for another hour and twenty minutes.

She set it down, sighed, turned out the gas, and crept back to bed. The raw January morning and inaction had set her shivering in every limb.

From her hard and narrow bed she lay listening to the sounds of movement about her. On all sides her fellows answering to the bell were preparing themselves for the day's work.

She no longer felt herself to have been deserted. She knew herself for a deserter. Whilst the others were cheerfully and without question mustering to the call of duty, she alone lay unresponsive.

A result of her years of absorbed work was that a plan of the Hospital had come to map the hemispheres of her brain as the configuration of the earth maps the surface of the terrestrial globe; its outlines determined by the streets skirting the Institution; its continents shown in the blocks of buildings composing it; its peoples classified according to the medical and surgical Chiefs beneath whose jurisdiction they came. A map whereof the wards were countries divided from others by the demarcation of disease instead of by that of race; by sex, by age, by organs affected. The map of a world whose commerce was sickness, whose gateways and out-patient rooms were ports for the entry and exit of its grim never-failing merchandise, which, blow the wind which way it would, how set the tide, was borne there all day long by the halt and the maimed and the blind; the sinner whom God—the saint whom man, had afflicted; the suffering woman, the hapless babe, the crippled child, the strong man struck down in the fight for existence by sharp accident—that Sword of Damocles hanging suspended by a fine hair of Destiny above the head of every human being subject to inexorable natural law.



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In this map which custom had etched upon the surface of her brain the Hospital Square, with its open asphalted space, its wired-off grass plots, gaunt and grimy trees, its clumps of smoky shrubs and narrow beds of sickly flowers on which the disease-blight of the place appeared to have undeservedly fallen, stood for hills and smiling valleys, for plains and spaces, for Nature and her pleasant places. And to these the hopeless incurable and the spent but hopeful convalescent were on fine days carried in their scarlet jackets to bask in air and sunshine, to woo such breezes bred in the country as the city had not stifled as they blew.

For though this dire city of Disease frowned its perpetual terrible monitions out upon the larger, perhaps equally dire, city amid which it stood, within its walls it smiled—if somewhat dourly, upon its denizens. Mercy and Skill, Pity and Knowledge, Cheerfulness and Courage sped fleet of foot and tender-handed through its thoroughfares from early dawn till midnight and from midnight once again till early dawn. For by a Divine All-Merciful dispensation, no ill, born of man's perversity and blindness, comes into being unattended by its twin sister good to succour and retrieve it.

All day long in this citadel of sickness, there were staunching of blood and binding up of wounds, exorcising of pain, heartening of weariness, mothering the orphaned, daughtering the aged, cheering the hours of suffering childhood; and moreover the operations of that grim charity which, cruel to be kind, lops off irreclaimable limbs, plucks out offending eyes, and removes with the clean knife malign excrescences which are the terrible fungoid blossomings of seeds sown by ignorance and vice in the flesh of humanity.

Cause and Effect, Cause and Unerring Effect! Sowing and Reaping, Sowing and Inevitable Reaping! These are the forces which without intermission impel the wheels of Evolution. And on the threshing-floors of Hospitals are gathered in some gruesome harvests.

Sometimes I have wondered, standing before a hospital at night, when mystic and mysterious powers are abroad, that there has not been visible above its sanctuary roof some white halo of luminosity, the shimmering of gentle wings—hovering exterior reflex of charities within.

Maybe it is there since the natural and the supernatural are but one, as the river mists are but the upsoarings of the river. Somewhere the spirits of gracious deeds done must be seen to glow like lamps. But—and this is sad to think—perhaps after all it is not there. For in the mill of routine whereby such communities are administered, even charities become dog-worn into mere automatic, uninspired habits, whereof expedition is the highest virtue.

In the meantime Camilla Braeburn, reduced by long years of such routine to the condition of a link in the great driving chain of one of Civilization's mills, missing the habit of motion which custom had imparted to her, found herself incapable of remaining quietly in bed while the cranks and levers of the Hospital machinery were grinding into action.

She rose again, re-lighted the gas and proceeded to dress. Not leisurely nor with the pleasant deliberation which abundance of time sanctioned, but with the brisk and rapid precision of a mind too long harnessed to haste to move at any other pace. Even this morning of mornings which ushered in a fresh and strange departure of her life, while she mechanically and with her accustomed expedition equipped herself in the new outfit of her new existence, her mind was running in the old grooves.

Now it was breakfast time, and in the bare and cheerless room in which the nurses took their meals, she pictured her fellows seated down the long tables drinking their tea and coffee from thick cups and partaking with but scant appetite the unappetising food provided. Breakfast over, she saw them troop out laughing and chatting into the Quadrangle, and like children going to school, separate into groups and seek the several blocks where their own especial wards and work awaited them.

She saw the night-nurses, whom their advent relieved, stream heavy-eyed from their long night duty in opposite directions, seeking their early morning supper, to pass later to their bedrooms, where, undressing by the gathering daylight, they would sleep the unrefreshing sleep of noon.

Her mind disembarked her in her own ward. She pictured herself listening methodically to the night-nurse's report, glancing the while to this bed and to that as some



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recorded occurrence or another of the vigil directed her attention to the occupant of this or that bed.

She saw the awakening heads upon the rows of pillows lift heavily from sleep or feverishly from lack of it, as the incursion of the nurses brought the dawning day and another round of ceaseless activities. Wounds woke and throbbed to the anticipation of recurrent dressings. Aching heads stabbed, remembering combs. The languid sick, spent and irritable from a night of hot-eyed sleeplessness, sickened and shrank from the inexorable washings and brushings and bed-makings, wherewith the great mill, once set in motion, involved them—would they or wouldn't they!

Poor Mrs. 17 would miss her, she reflected. She had always found time to make crisp toast for the feeble old woman who had known better things ere she came to be stranded in Hospital, dying of heart-disease engendered by a lifetime of heart-aches. Baby 11, too, the burned baby in the corner cot, whose scarred face was beginning to smile and dimple through its unsightly dressings, having learned that a pocket of nurse's apron might hold sweetmeats as well as scissors.

By this time she stood dressed in the dark blue gown which was to clothe her new existence. A small portion of herself, her chest and one blue shoulder becoming suddenly visible to her in her dingy mirror, she was shaken by a gust of irresolution. After all, could she leave them? After all, could she tear herself up by the roots and transplant herself amid remote and strange environment? How could she live, lacking the duties and interests which had become the only grooves of action that her nature knew? For a moment she contemplated throwing off her new blue gown, donning the discarded uniform which lay near her like a sloughed skin and repairing in haste to the post she had been on the point of deserting.

Then the habit of discipline prevailed. She had fought out the question before. Her health was in danger of breaking. The doctors had insisted that she must make a change—or be incapacitated. The fear of incapacitation had been the threat compelling her. Incapacitation! She had seen so much of it. Heavens! was there room in the world for

more? To lie—a hospital case stranded upon life's shore! Even change and desertion of her post were preferable.

Moreover, she knew she would now find her post filled. Her substitute would by this time have given poor old Mrs. 17 her breakfast (she shrank from deciding whether the gentle old lady would have had the courage to request her accustomed toast). Already the burned Baby in the corner cot would be smiling through its scars and bandages upon its new nurse. There could be no looking back. Her hand was on the plough, and the plough was in a fresh field.

She collected and folded the few things remaining to be packed. She found room for them in corners of her apparently full trunk. Closing it finally she locked and strapped it. Already the labels were attached, one beside the hasp and, to make assurance doubly sure, another upon a handle. The greater portion of her small savings (a hospital nurse is not munificently salaried) had been expended upon the trunk and upon the new outfit within it. Two labels halved the risk that her scant portion of the world's goods might be lost to her in transit.

She had bought herself a dressing-bag, perhaps an inexcusable piece of luxury. But the pleasant gleamings of its electro-plated fittings had out-dazzled the reproaches of her conscience.

She put on her little blue straw bonnet with its simple trimmings of blue velvet, to which a small steel buckle gave neatness and finish. She adjusted the ends of the long blue gossamer veil which streamed behind.

The deep-hued velvet contrasted with the whiteness of her skin and brought up golden glintings in her dark hair. But she paid no heed to these.

She descended the narrow stairway to the nurses' breakfast-room, and, for the first time during her five years of hospital service, ate her breakfast alone at the long table. The maid who waited on her, a little under-sized Cockney, shrewd of wit and saucy of tongue, expressed regret that she was leaving. She hoped "Nurse" would soon come back to them. She tossed a pert and pretty face. For her part she did not expect to be long in that place. She flung a disparaging glance about the white-washed walls. She was



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going to be married, she was glad to say; *she* wasn't going to remain a galley-slave all her days. Women who knew enough to come in when it rained, made the best of their looks and their time and got a man to work for them while they could. After all, men were worth little more!

Camilla smiled and wished her happiness. She bestowed her quatum toward the wedding garments. The girl thanked her and renewed her counsels. Let the ugly women work! said she. There were enough and to spare, goodness knew! Nurses had a life of it, and if she was one of the pretty ones —Well, she'd just chuck it. Blest if she wouldn't!

Camilla had said her good-byes the previous evening. They still tasted ill on her tongue. Breakfast finished, she kept within doors. She was not sentimental, and routine had ironed a stiff surface upon her emotions. But there was nothing good enough about good-byes that she should duplicate them.

At length all was ready. Her trunk had been brought down and placed upon a hansom, her dressing-bag was in her hand. She fee'd the dingy man for bringing down her trunk, a man who habitually burrowed in the earth-works of the mill, but occasionally emerged above ground to perform tasks too menial for his betters. She bestowed a sixpence upon the smiling Buttons, who was young enough to feel and grin delight in anything savouring of novelty, even the departure of an old favourite.

The cabman, who was drumming on his breast with shapeless leatherne fists after the fashion of a gorilla fortifying himself for an attack, but in his case with the inoffensive object of fortifying himself against the cold, recalled the fact that he had been once a patient in her ward. He recalled it with respectful gratitude, at the same time disclaiming any wish to renew the experience. It was the "mernotony" that told, he said. He hoped she was going for a right good "ollerday," which "nusses well deserved, seein' they couldn't never do anuff for nobody."

She nodded cheerfully to his remarks. Then with a final glance round and a wave of the hand to a friendly face at a window she stepped into the cab.

The man drove slowly through the quadrangle. The Gate-

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porter in his scarlet-coat stood holding the gate. She leaned forward and shook hands with him. He was an old and chatty friend. He shook his head upon her going. In his opinion it was a bad look-out for the Hospital. The gate closed sharply. The cabman whipped forward his horse into the fog-filmed January air.

She had left the old life for ever behind her, she reflected, sighing.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE NEW DEPARTURE.

Our society is encumbered by ponderous machinery which resembles the endless aqueducts which the Romans built over hill and dale, and which are superseded by the discovery of the law that water rises to the level of its source.

SOME of the most momentous actions of our lives result from the impulse of trivial forces we have unwittingly set eddying round us. A concomitance of these converge fortuitously—or so it seems—to form a current which may sweep us off our feet.

A letter written in a mood of dejection. A cab summoned in a fit of anger. Two days later our mood of dejection has been as long forgotten, but the train of circumstances invoked by our letter is operating. The angry impulse which impelled the summoning of the cab has begun to evaporate by the time the cab is at the door. But its arrival is the last determining straw of a departure from an old into some new and it may be disastrous path.

So it had been with Camilla. A fit of palpitation in her bedroom, so serious as to cause alarming faintness, had been mentioned casually to a fellow nurse. By her it was reported to the matron. Investigated by the matron it had brought her health beneath the official eye of the Institution. Eventually she found herself, sorely against her will, in the Sister's little room beside the ward, awaiting, with an unfastened bodice, the noon-day visit of the senior physician,

for whose mature experience her case had been judged grave enough to call.

The beat of hoofs, the glide of wheels, followed by a subdued bustle in the ward, told that the great man had arrived. His voice in the corridor, the tramp of his following of students, then the opening of the ward-door and the sudden suppressed hush greeting his appearance, made her sink trembling into a chair.

For now it was she who was caught in the grip of that machinery whereof she had so long been but part and parcel for the manipulation of those others. A minute later she was but a passive object in the hands of the senior wisdom of the place. A smile of friendly recognition, a kindly word, a cheery chiding of her agitation, a firm learned finger at her pulse and the train of circumstances circled round her. Another minute and with a shrinking shyness—the routine was so different when it applied to oneself!—she had set back her bodice, revealing to masculine eyes the white beautiful shoulders and chest of which she had forgotten to be proud. The kind old eyes made their rapid survey, seeking the pathology, perhaps sensing the beauty, but with the honest impersonal gravity of the physician, dwelling for no longer than an involuntary instant upon any other than the scientific aspects of the case. The cold, hard lips of his stethoscope found the white roundness of her breast, drank the life sounds whispering through the chambers of the heart beneath it.

Another minute and the investigation was over. She was re-buttoning her bodice, whilst the doctor patted her shoulder as though she had been a frightened child. She made her concise, quick answers to his questionings. Then the great man, who was small of stature and of homely countenance with nothing of significance in his appearance beyond his keen wise eyes, folded up his stethoscope and replaced it in his pocket.

"Do you understand, Nurse," he said firmly, "you must give up work at once. You must take a change, a rest—say a three months' rest"—this tentatively, the wise eyes having been wont to see material difficulties in the way of medical counsels of perfection.



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She shook her head. She was ashamed that her lips trembled. The self-consciousness induced by all this unwanted attention to herself was proving demoralising.

"Well, well," he said cheerily, "a month then. At all events we must make up our minds to lose you from the Hospital. You are," he smiled gravely, "a fine physiological specimen. We must not let pathology claim you. The work here—hard routine, poor air and not very cheerful surroundings, have proved too much. You must get a change of work, a post in some country hospital, the charge of a private patient at the sea. That is, of course, when you have had a rest. You can manage a month perhaps at home."

"I am an orphan," she stated, without emotion. The circumstance was of standing too old to possess any greenness of grief. "I have no home."

"Friends?" he suggested—lightly in order that, should her reply be in the negative, the confession should not wound her sensibilities or pride.

"No friends," she said in a low voice, "with whom I could take a month's rest."

His face fell a little. He glanced at her with interest, attentively. As a nurse she was well-known to him. Indeed she stood high in the esteem of all, a woman—though in appearance but a girl—pre-eminently to be trusted, skilful, resourceful, absorbed in her work, unremitting in her devotion to her patients. Of notable appearance too. But she made so little of that that it was sometimes overlooked.

He jerked himself out of a fit of abstraction. He resumed his normal cheerfulness. A sad case! But life as he had known it, was crammed with sad cases.

"Perhaps"—he adventured—"Pardon me, but perhaps" (he glanced at her hand) "you may be engaged to be married."

"No," she answered, smiling slightly.

His glance said this was a pity. A spark in his eyes bespoke scorn of a race of younger tepid-blooded men. But he had come to the end of his suggestions. He wrote her a prescription. He ordered wine and nourishing food. He insisted upon a week in bed.

"In the meantime," he said, "we will see what further can be done about a change of air for you."

He became once more a senior of science, and accompanied by the Sister, who had stood by deferentially during the consultation, passed into the ward, and took his place at the head of his army of students.

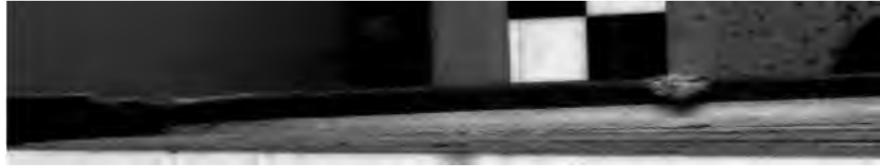
That week in bed! Would she ever forget it? How she had lain hour after hour staring about her ugly, cheerless, little room, with no break in the dull monotony further than those of meals and medicines, no society beyond the few minutes now one, now another, of her fellows snatched from her off-duty hours. She read—read listlessly. Her brain was too tired for reading more serious than that of novels. And life as she found it in novels was so unlike life as she had found it out of them—that novels when they did not irritate, bored her.

Life as she had seen it, had been full of drama; murder, suicide, accident, and sudden death; bereavement, betrayal, squalor, selflessness, selfishness; virtue and vice, nature and abnormality lying side by side in neighbouring beds.

Beside her experiences the scenes pourtrayed in books, other than the blood-books devoured by the Buttons, seemed pale and insignificant. It was a case of comedies of manners as opposed to flesh and blood tragedies.

Heroines who languished, heroes who vaunted themselves! And for the most part all for love—love which appeared to her to be so trivial and inadequate a motive in a world where men cut their throats or half-murdered women, where babies died mute and inert from starvation, or wailed the anguish of pink, tender flesh dragged charred and mortifying from the corroding jaws of flame; where bright sunny mornings would bring in a batch of victims from a railway accident, men so crushed and battered, so blood- and dust- and smoke-begrimed that the problem was to know where to begin to restore them once again to human semblance.

And the odd thing was that the tragedies and dramas she had seen in flesh and blood roused in the sufferers and in their friends emotions far less keen and turbulent than novelists invited one to credit to their heroines, for no better



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reason than that a love-letter had miscarried, or that a lady had preferred another.

She threw aside the novels wearily. Life was too serious for the gay and light ones. The serious ones fell absurdly short of the truth.

She returned to her ward but little better in body and infinitely worse in mind for her enforced rest.

Then another heart-attack had renewed the horror of incapacitation.

Meanwhile, however, the swirl of currents had been all the while converging. Her kind senior had not forgotten her. He now imparted the last impulse to the swell of forces which was to transport her into a new life. A letter had reached him from a friend asking his assistance in finding a skilled and trustworthy nurse for his invalid wife.

"It is a magnificent air, a fine old place, I believe an easy position, and," he added delicately, "a good salary."

So she had come to be driving one morning to Paddington through the fog-filmed January air, her trunk above her, her new dressing-bag beside her, she herself clad in the blue nurse's habit for which she had discarded her hospital uniform. For the decree had gone forth that she must not return to hospital life.

"Hard routine when it does not succeed in making hacks—kills," the doctor told her. "In all human probability should you come back to it—"

He broke off short and smiled genially. But she knew what he meant. She had heard him use the phrase on other occasions. When he observed "In all human probability if you do this thing or that" the hiatus he left verbally unfilled meant "My good sir (or madam), you will be rushing to your death."

## CHAPTER III.

## AT THE STATION.

The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

At Paddington the cabman returned sixpence from the fare she handed him. He shook his head gravely.

"I was a patient in your ward, Nuss," he said.

She received the sixpence in the spirit wherein it had been tendered, seriously, and as a token of good will. She smiled while she was touched. The childlike action of the red-faced, corpulent man brightened the dull place. It lay warm in her mind as she followed the porter and her modest pile of baggage to the booking office. It seemed odd to be taking a single ticket. Her yearly holiday compassed her experience of travel. For this a return ticket available for a month had always sufficed—had indeed given her a grace she had not utilised.

Eyes followed her down the platform. The nurse is ever interesting by virtue of her vocation. But this nurse with her fine pre-occupied face, of a pallor almost startling, a pallor bleached upon it by night-work and by years spent in the unwholesome atmosphere of sickness, attracted more than ordinary interest. She moved with the air of helpfulness and womanly compassion she had acquired from long living amid pitiful scenes. It was as though she felt the world to be a great ward and all people her patients. Men turned appreciative looks upon her features and drooped them before the gravity of her eyes. The mystery of pain and death



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surrounded her as with an atmosphere. So had she made her nature and her calling one. She did not heed the glances. She was indifferent to men. Sex is not a pretty factor in the class amid which her work had taken her. Sex is not always a pretty factor in any class. This being so the well-bred conceal it beneath an impersonal bearing. The poor are more candid. Early in her career, her fastidiousness moved her to ignore, so far as was possible, the whole region of character and action whereof it was the impulse.

Mentally she made her vows and like a nun dropped her eyes upon that world of the flesh wherewith she felt no sympathy. Sometimes she wondered whether her attitude might not result from a missing faculty. If so she as frequently congratulated herself upon its absence.

Love, as men and women presented it, was responsible for more than half the crime and misery of life. That it was a strong motive the crime and misery too clearly proved. Personally it was unintelligible to her. Her experiences had so impressed her that men and women appeared to be comrades and friends in a world of distresses. And to be kissed by a House Surgeon in a corridor, or to flirt with and flutter at the coming of a Dresser or a Student seemed to spoil the finer essence of that comradeship and friendship.

She felt vaguely that a great admiration and devotion might be possible between a man and a woman, but she could trace no resemblance to this in the promiscuous flirtations of every-day life.

Her beauty brought her admirers—that was inevitable. And because men have never learned that the beauty to which they are so susceptible is frequently a possession of the women least susceptible to them, her insensibility to her admirers mystified and wounded them.

One of the visiting seniors after some months of waiting succeeded in finding her one afternoon alone in the Sister's room. He forthwith proposed to her. With a diffident confidence he regretted his lack of opportunity to make himself better known to her. She thanked him the while she did her courteous best to conceal her amazement. Gently she refused him. He never forgave her, and forever

afterwards met her with mortified resentment. He found it impossible to regard the refusal of a woman whose day was a round of hard labour, whose salary was less than that of his cook, to share his position and wealth, in any other light than that of an unmitigated personal affront. He would have been as astonished to learn that she liked him as she had been astonished to learn that he loved her.

Had it not been for this refusal, despite her youth she would have been made Sister of a ward. Her work and the esteem in which she was held entitled her to the promotion. But the opposition of her quondam admirer, unavowed but working strenuously, so turned the scale that the post was given to one less capable and less esteemed.

She was more hurt by her sense of the injustice of things than she was affected by the loss of the position. For, some subtle intuition—a glance from his eyes when they next met—told her the cause of her defeat. To have unwittingly made an enemy of one who had wished to be her friend, must always be a source of pain to the generous-minded. And as I have said, although she did not love, she had a liking for him. But that liking may be less of a step in the direction of love than is even misliking, is a mystery uncomprehended of men.

Other admirers she had whose wounded self-esteem at her insensibility was salved by the circumstance that she extended it to all. Still others regarded that very impartiality as an unpardonable contumely against their sex. In truth it arose simply from the fact that her nature travelling along definite lines of development was somewhat more monogamous than is usual. Flirtation after all is a mere delicate form of polygamy.

The porter wheeling her baggage and casting an expert eye about him, presently found her a corner seat in a third-class compartment. But as she was, at his signal, upon the point of entering, he moved on abruptly.

"Baby in there, miss," he said with a condemnatory head-shake and a glance upon her uniform. His respect for it proceeded from personal acquaintance. He too had been a patient in a hospital. His glance bespoke a consideration for her immediate welfare to which he, doubtless also from



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personal experience, regarded the presence of a baby as a menace. She went back.

"I don't mind babies," she said firmly.

He shrugged his shoulders and humouring a tolerance he manifestly despised, he sulkily flung up her strapped cloak and umbrella to the rack. Then grunting his thanks for the threepenny bit she bestowed, he abandoned her to her fate with the air of one washing his hands of a person above taking advice. She secured a hot water tin and inviting the young mother of the baby, seated in the opposite corner, to share it, she unstrapped her cloak, tucked it neatly about her knees and leaning a tired back against the cushions surveyed the crowded platform at her leisure.

The train was not due to start for twelve minutes, yet already intending passengers were bustling up, breathless and with the harassed mien of persons who discredit their own clocks and watches, or have little faith in time-tables, or it may be still less in their own personal capacity for interpreting these.

A few men stood leisurely in great coats before the windows of saloon carriages, exchanging monosyllables with smartly dressed women within, the while they enjoyed a cigar before starting.

Others with gun or golf-clubs and with that air of release which characterises men who have broken away from their womenkind and are off for a bachelor holiday, gazed from their comfortable corners out upon the world as though defying it to intrude upon their recently acquired, and it might be dearly purchased, solitude.

Dogs in leash *en route* for late shootings, shrank together shamefaced and dejected, dragging behind their master's servant up and down the dingy platform, to the onlookers brightening and freshening it with suggestions of wind-swept moor and turnip-field and odorous covert.

Up and down the platform, the loose-fleshed, wild-eyed mother of an infant in arms, with another dragging at a hand, went desperately seeking haven, scattering parcels in her wake.

Then, as though it had been turned on with a switch, a spark of alertness leapt into the faces down the platform.

Porters hurried faster, shouted more loudly. Doors banged. Harassed passengers chased to and fro with added fever. The reiterant thuds of trunks and boxes hustled pell-mell into baggage vans became blended into an allegretto and staccato chorus. A tall man with a white flag in one hand, a watch in the other, and in his eye a disparaging glance at the platform clock, stalked from an office and stood scanning the watch like one marking moments of doom. A guard blew his whistle. More doors slammed. The father and mother of a large family with the family panting and struggling in their rear, dashed suddenly into view, attended by vociferating porters and piles of baggage, only to be forcibly restrained by the stern hand of officialdom from hurling themselves in mass upon the starting train. Too late! The tall man had slipped back his watch into his pocket and was sawing the air with his dirty white flag.

More arms and efforts were put forth to restrain the distressed, belated family, who, seeing the train begin moving out of reach beneath their starting and distracted eyes, charged forward recklessly and fruitlessly, hypnotised out of reason and drawn by the slowly gathering motion.

A last door banged with a note of finality. Persons waved hands and handkerchiefs. A few shrilled farewells as the train of carriages wound like the jointed lengths of a great anaconda with a powerful gliding movement out from the station. Then only its tail showed, the red glow of its lights twinkling lurid. A moment later all had vanished. The alert expressions in the faces on the platform were switched off. All turned, and with dropped shoulders and an air of dull relaxation following upon tension, streamed back to those places in life whence the common focus of interest supplied by the train had called them.

Camilla sank back into her corner with a tired sigh. The bustle of departure and the strain involved in packing away so many diverse aims and interests, milk-cans and baggage, within the limited space, seemed to have made calls in sympathy and observation upon her weary nervous system. She closed her eyes, spent and depressed.

She was allowed, however, but the briefest respite. The porter's experienced eye had gauged the baby aright.



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Startled for a minute into sudden stark amazement by the sight of houses and objects all at once taking to their heels and racing past the carriage windows, it broke the next minute into high-pitched shrieks of terror. It refused all comfort, creature or mental, a currant biscuit, a peppermint sweet, a drink of sour-looking milk, a gnawed apple dusty from frequent monotonous reiterations of the law of gravity. It declined to believe that "Puss, puss, puss" was to be seen issuing to its mother's call from beneath the petticoats of the lady sitting opposite. It stretched its legs stiffly until its body was as rigid as a lightning-rod and like it without curve to accommodate itself to the "ride-a-cock-horse" of the maternal knee.

Now and again it held its cries and remained quite quiet, staring with wet distended eyes upon the phantasy, as though to reassure itself that its alarm was baseless. But seeing the houses and stations still pelting along, it threw itself back again and rent the air.

Camilla went presently to the rescue. The precocious, sickly mother, in whom child-bearing had bred but further immaturity, only disturbed it by her nervous, unconvincing tactics. She glanced round surreptitiously upon her fellow-travellers, abashed to be publicly proclaimed the parent of such a "young Turk" as she angrily styled while she slapped him.

Camilla, with a firm, experienced touch, withdrew him from her thin and inept arms. His screams grew shriller upon finding himself in a stranger clutch. An elderly lady seated beside Camilla, covered her ears with her hands and launched her a reproachful glance for bringing the miscreant nearer. The fourth occupant of the compartment, a journalist revising sheets of copy, got up with an impatient gesture and passed out into the corridor.

Camilla, accustomed to infants torn from their mothers' arms into the larger embrace of the Hospital, firmly and with gentle force corrected the backward arc this one was making of his soft body, and clasping him closely soothed and rocked him. Accustomed to his mother's irritable violence he pushed and fought her with his infant fists. Then finding himself powerless against an unyielding superior

strength or soothed by her magnetic touch he presently lay still. He opened his wet eyes to see if the landscape were still at its tricks. It was, but apparently the grip of superior force wherein he found himself imparted confidence, for he lay winking the eyes now upon it as though fright had given place to philosophic interest. He stared at his captor astounded. The immensity of the problem of how he had come to be where he was induced a sort of stunned composure. Finally he gave it up and fell asleep.

"What a blessing!" the elderly lady observed, shifting her place to that vacated by the journalist. "Does he often cry like that?" she demanded severely of his progenitor.

"Bless you no," the latter defended him, "he's good anuff when nothink puts him out. He ain't used to trains, ye see. But my 'usbun's mother she would 'ave me take him to see 'er. That's 'ow it is."

The elderly lady, a typical old maid, who nevertheless wore two wedding-rings, conveyed by an eloquent sniff her conviction that the baby's paternal grandmother would live to regret her misguided obstinacy.

She took a *Christian Citadel* from her bag and, donning a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez, plunged into its pages with an air of declining to discuss the subject further.

The precocious mother, snubbed, surreptitiously conveyed the baby's dirty half-sucked peppermint to her mouth, the while she brushed biscuit crumbs from a cheap skirt, new apparently and very much trimmed, no doubt to impress the misguided grandmother.

"He seems to quite 'ave taken to you, miss," she ventured presently to Camilla. "I'm sure you're very kind. But he's bin awake since soon after five. He's that artful he seemed to know where he was goin'."

"Perhaps he will take out his sleep now," Camilla said.

"Very like he will," the girl said. "He sleeps beautiful," she added proudly, "when he do get off."



## CHAPTER IV.

## IN THE TRAIN.

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

HAVING transferred the baby to his mother's arms, Camilla became free to consider her own affairs. She was surprised to find herself already amid fields and open spaces. It was a dreary enough outlook, she thought, the winter drabs and weather-worn greens of January, with the skeleton limbs of leafless trees barring a sunless sky.

Those who know and love the country are able to see a characteristic charm in each and every season. But Camilla neither knew nor loved the country and, used as she was to the bustle and excitement of London streets, the drab deserted landscape stretching from leaden horizon to leaden horizon depressed her sorely.

At stations where houses and life were seen to have clustered in a cheerful knot her interest revived. Then as the houses became less frequent, straggling in twos and threes and finally tailing off into single cottages, and she was once again marooned amid drab squares of hedge-bordered fields, her interest died. Shuddering, she asked herself how she could have been induced to accept the exile of country life. Now and again a picturesque glimpse relieved the scene, an old-world hamlet, with a score of brown thatched cottages nestling for sanctuary and sweet protection beside a grey old ivy-mantled Church; a farm-house, flanked by portly yellow corn-ricks proclaiming a last year's ample harvest; an upland of rich brown earth being combed into silken furrows by the

slow soft delve of a gaily painted plough, its team of plodding horses moving leisurely; a meadow where wide-horned cattle browsed or with bent heads tasted the waters of an overflowing brook. These things made charming patches. But, she reflected, what a life! The condition of a stagnant pool as compared with the rushing of a river, in the stimulating swirl whereof inaction were impossible.

"I can't abide the country—myself," the little city-bred mother said, looking out upon it with a shrug of narrow shoulders. "There ain't never anything to do nur see. No folk, nor omnibuses, nor gas lamps. It gives you the blues. Thank goodness my 'usband's mother lives in Bristol town, and not in any of these country parts!"

Camilla felt a trifle ashamed of her reflections on finding them shared by her little Cockney fellow-traveller.

"People who live in the country like it," she said, suddenly moved to defend it.

"Dessay they think they do," the girl returned, with a dubious shake of the head. "There's a lot in bein' used to things. They say eels gets used to skinning. But give me London."

Camilla knew the type. And she knew that by "London" this poor little narrow-witted degenerate meant two rooms—one room perhaps—in a slum where the air was foul and languid, where vulgar sights and sounds and deeds were about her all day long, jests and curses, toil and turmoil, blows and privation—life at its ebb-tide, squalid and ugly.

"Wouldn't you like a pretty cottage like that?" she questioned, pointing to one they were passing at the moment—one which nestled lovingly and like a large-sized mushroom in the elbow of a field. It had an air of having grown there with the grasses.

"My!" the girl shrilled, eyeing it. "I'd be moped to death. I'd drown myself in a week, if there is any place in the country where you *can* drown yourself."

The other traveller looked up sharply from the pages of her *Citadel*.

"You were not speaking literally," she said.

"No, ma'am," the girl returned, "I were speakin' to this lady."



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Camilla glanced at her, deliberating whether the adverb had proved too much for her or whether the smart Cockney wits, detecting censure, had administered a covert snub.

She could not decide. Neither it seemed could the recipient. The girl's face betrayed nothing.

The severe lady plunged back, a whit discomfited, into her pages.

Presently the girl put a hand into her bag and withdrew a package wrapped in newspaper. Unwrapping it with the one-handed deftness of the mother, she disclosed some wedges of unappetising cake. After a moment's hesitation she proffered it with shy effrontery before the gates of the *Citadel*. The lady looking somewhat outraged at the offering,

"It was bought at the shop," the girl said in its apology. "If you might be feelin' hungry——"

The lady shook her head.

"Oh no, thank you," she said and entrenched herself again behind her pages. The girl flushed. She stared. She distended her eyes aggressively as though she had been opening batteries upon the Christian fortress. Then diffidently and less confident about the etiquette of railway-travelling she passed her opened parcel to Camilla.

"It ain't 'ome-made," she said, varying the form of her apology.

Camilla, with the air of receiving an accustomed courtesy, smiled her thanks and accepted a portion.

"It don't seem manners," the girl said, with a baleful glance toward the fortress, "to eat things all to yourself."

The pages fluttered as though the bullet had found a billet. There was no other sign.

Then the young mother, having eaten her own portion with evident relish, nestled herself comfortably into her corner, and closed her eyes above thought and digestion, the baby soundly sleeping in her arms.

Soon the baby sat up smiling. It was an unwholesome little puffy thing, with wrists braceleted by rickets and a skin spotted with pustules. Yet it seemed to regard life and the world in which it found itself as unmitigated blessings.

"Has it been vaccinated?" the lady of the *Citadel* in-

quired with rather a timid glance, Camilla thought, upon the pustules.

"No, nur christened," its mother returned. "His father's a conscious objector and don't 'old with it. He's read pamphlets about it."

The unregenerate infant broke into a crop of gurglings. Smiles so broad and ill-balanced distorted his small features that they seemed to disturb his centre of gravity, causing him to topple first to this side, then to that, as though a facetious finger, instead of merely his own sense of humour, had dug him in the ribs.

He was no better clad against the winter cold than by a white cotton frock, a flannel petticoat washed thin, and a pair of woollen socks with a pattern of holes, displaying chilled and purple flesh. His bonnet was new, a thing of buckram and cheap ribbon, designed, one might think, with a view to chafing his unfortunate skin, rather than for providing warmth. Yet so has Nature endowed young things with a joy of living, that, his sleep having made up the arrears of the night, he could not refrain from dropping the teat of the bottle wherefrom he was regaling himself upon curdled milk, to break at intervals into his o'er-spreading smiles and volleys of cheerful chucklings.

Camilla missed him and his jocular spirits after the train had rolled out of Bristol. Here he and his mother were clutched beneath the wing of a hard-visaged middle-aged woman, whose first moments of acquaintance with her new daughter and grandchild were expressed in sharp condemnatory glances at the former's tawdry finery.

Camilla, nodding a good-bye from the window, anticipated trouble between the younger and the elder generation ere the expiration of the visit.

Her fellow-traveller let down the window sharply. She put out her head and drew in draughts of such fresh air as the town afforded.

"I shouldn't be surprised," she said, "if that wretched child hasn't small-pox."

"Oh no," Camilla affirmed simply, "it was only chicken-pox."

"I never think the authorities do their duty," the lady

said grimly. Camilla not defending them, she retired once more within her fortress.

The journey passed into the endless unrolling of an endless panorama. Trees, fields, farm-houses and country roads; straggling cottages, brick and mortar hives, then grander undulating land as the scene rose to mountain heights, soft, rounded masses, nurturing breasts of great Mother Nature. Valleys again and pine woods, green and odorous; a swollen river, its brown waters restlessly churning its banks; a canal tame and currentless reflecting the dull sky—a drab riband bordered by its towing path and spanned by whitewashed bridges. Here and there a meadow with lush grass and reeds like spears where Highland cattle with their broad shock brows and curving horns showed like a bit of untamed primitive nature, though the fine brutes with their soft eyes and licking tongues were gentle enough.

The gliding pictures hypnotised her sense and soothed the prick of questions teasing her brain like burs. Who were the persons to whom—what the life to which she was journeying? A middle-aged Baronet with a middle-aged invalid wife, occupying a great old-fashioned house in far-off Cornwall! What could one construct upon such scant and sketchy outlines?

She brushed aside the burs and killed some portion of an hour by partaking in the luncheon car of a meal for which she felt but little appetite.

Returning, she discovered the journalist. He had taken refuge in the guard's van. Seated on a bale of goods, with frowning brows and a pencil between his lips, he was apparently forging unwilling copy.

Her fellow-traveller had emerged from her *Citadel*, and lay back in her seat undefended, tired lines of travel in her harsh face. Her lids had dropped. A few sparse tears had screwed themselves between them and were creeping down her gaunt cheeks.

Even the most disagreeable of us conceal within our crust anxieties and hopes and fondnesses. Sometimes, indeed, the very harshness of our crust is caused by these, as rough scars succeed upon deep wounds.

As the hours wore on, travellers in the various compart-

ments descended to progressive depths of deshabille. Some, who earlier had sat up with uncompromising mien, now lounged, crossed one leg over another, and even relinquished hat or bonnet.

Books and papers strewed the seats. Baskets stood with lids up, revealing cakes and fruits and bottles, which had previously been concealed like crimes. Opened dressing-bags showed combs and brushes, called into requisition to repair the ravages of travel. Mingled fumes of eau-de-Cologne for the relief of aching temples, of oranges and whiskey for the relief of other ills, pervaded the stuffy air.

People came out of their cages and ranged up and down the narrow corridor. A few children played hide-and-seek, entangling themselves between the legs of outraged older passengers.

Guards and stewards came and went with airs of authority. And all the while the train tore on, breaking at intervals into discordant shrieks as though protesting against a ruthless tyranny which doomed it, for no purpose of its own and for no reward that it would reap, to a toil of perpetual motion.

Now and again under stress of an incline it slowed and panted. But, the gradient achieved, its tyrants, the oily stoker and the driver, spurred it on again, until infuriate it bounded forward, regaining pace and hurling back the never-ending gleaming lines of metals, like a conjurer ejecting tinsel ribbons.

With the journey northward the air had waxed colder. A few snowflakes, reluctant pioneers from cloud-companies lowering above, began to straggle downwards in half-hearted fashion. The face of Nature took on a look of gloomy chagrin as though the day had proved a failure.

Camilla paced the corridor for warmth. Lights had been turned on, and in the ever unlovely struggle between day and artificial light, disorder within the compartments showed squalidly.

Where space permitted men lay full length along the seats. Others drooped forward or sidewise, for the most part with closed eyes. A few still bravely grappled with the print of book or paper. A quartet of smokers were playing



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cards. One coarse-featured, heavily-bearded man, lay sleeping like a brute, his uncouth features upturned to the light, his mouth fallen open, a picture of frank, unreserved animalism.

Camilla marked the face of a young girl seated opposite, her eyes drawn against her will to him, her expression one of horror-sickened fascination.

One by one the children had succumbed, and for the most part couched in uncomfortable attitudes, rendered as much more comfortable as circumstances permitted in nests which their mothers had made for them with rugs or of their own limbs.

A bride, throned by fond hands in a bower of wraps, showed like a sleeping beauty, her fair hair gleaming in the lamplight like a halo, her slender body in a graceful pose. Of the eyes still wakeful her bridegroom's were among them. Leaning gently forward his looks were fastened, reverent and rapt, upon her slumbers. Happy the bride who is able to sleep charmingly! It is a greater talent than to fiddle. Happier her groom who thus is able to retain illusions. Sleep is a great revealer.

Camilla was recalled from a doze by a slackening of speed. She peered into the darkness for the name of the station. She found herself at her journey's end. Her fellow-passenger awoke and glanced sleepily up at her, as she reached down her things from the rack.

"Do you get out here?" she sighed enviously. "I have yet another hour."

Camilla smiled sympathy, and, bag and umbrella in hand, went out into the corridor as the train dragged into the station.

A smart cockaded footman on the platform, informed by her nurse's dress, singled her out and followed the carriage. He came into the corridor and saluted.

"Are you for Sir Nigel Harland's, ma'am?"

He relieved her of her burdens. A breath unmistakeable of sea air smote her cheek and filled her nostrils as she descended to the platform. She was conducted to a smart brougham, which, with its pair of horses, stood beside the platform.

Another minute and she was shut amid its cushioned comfort, enveloped in a great fur rug, her feet on a hot tin. The footman leapt beside the coachman. The horses chafing for motion, dashed forward. She caught a last glimpse of the train with its lights gliding slowly again into the night. She experienced a little sense of loss—of the comradeship of a day. Then, relieved that her long journey was at an end, she leaned back watching the illuminated unilluminating patch of road, which, shown for a moment by the carriage lamps, the next moment merged into another patch equally illuminated and unilluminating.

More panorama; drab road, green ditch, tree-trunks cut off sharply at the knees by the upper borders of the carriage windows, a mile-stone, an alehouse, and a long stone wall.

Then the carriage turned in sharply between two tall gates. A smooth glide up a long drive, glimpses of hillock and rock and the midnight of a dense plantation amid the trunks whereof the lamps threw moving shadows. Finally, the horses drew up with a flourish at the entrance of a large well-lighted house. The door opened quickly. A man in livery unfastened the carriage door, and waited for her to descend.

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## CHAPTER V.

## THE ARRIVAL.

The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling.

SHE passed into an oak-panelled hall, its ceiling low, its tiled floor spread with rugs, a company of ancestral persons gloaming in gilt frames obscurely from the walls. Palms and pots of flowering plants, the latter mingling perfumes, made spots of colour in the uncertain light.

A cheerful looking elderly woman in a dark silk gown appeared suddenly from somewhere, and shook hands with her.

"Sir Nigel is dining out," she said. "He asked me to say that he would see you in the morning. You must be tired after your journey. You will like to go straight to your room." Assenting, she followed the silk gown up a marble staircase, broad and softly carpeted. On either side further ancestral companies gloomed obscurely from the walls. Brain and body were by this time so fatigued, however, that less impressive objects passed unnoticed. She had a sense merely of moving through warm and dimly lighted, padded space. Her guide stopped before a door amid a corridor of doors. Opening it:

"This will be your room," she said pleasantly. "I hope you will find it comfortable."

Its appearance certainly foreshadowed comfort, its rose-wood furniture mirroring cheerfully the light from a great fire burning on an old-fashioned hearth. Three tall win-

dows showed muffled with curtains, amber of hue, and patterned with quaint heraldic beasts rampant in rich colour. A large four-posted bedstead, similarly draped, displayed its turned-down sheets of snowy linen and frilled pillows, inviting to sleep beneath a rose-hued quilt of downy satin. From the bed stole a faint sweet scent of lavender.

In a corner was a writing-table, with a silver-mounted blotter, an antique silver inkstand and tray, with pens and pencils and cheerful scarlet sealing-wax. On the table stood a bowl of flowers.

"What a beautiful room!" she exclaimed, spurred from her fatigue by a rush of artistic pleasure.

"It *is* pleasant," the other assented in a tone of faint praise, as though mentally comparing it with its betters. "Especially by day when you get nice views of the park and sea."

She moved about the room, stirred the fire, adjusted a curtain, drew up a chair. Camilla could feel that these were mere pretexts for lingering, the while her glances were critical and questioning upon the stranger.

"Dinner shall be served for you at once in the morning-room, opposite the stairs," she said, moving to the door.

The nurse pleaded fatigue. "If I am not to see my patient—to see Lady Harland—to-night," she said, "I should prefer to unpack and to go straight to bed."

The housekeeper, as Camilla later discovered her to be, insisted upon sending her a plate of soup, bade her good-night, and retired.

While she sat eating her soup, her baggage was brought in almost noiselessly and respectfully unstrapped. A maid bringing hot water replenished her fire, removed the silver salver and her empty plate. She was left alone for the night.

She lay back in her chair for some luxurious moments, enjoying the warmth and quiet, and smiling slightly upon the contrast of her uprising and her present surroundings. The beautiful room with its aesthetic refinement, its old-world air, the generous fire, the flowers, the luxurious lavender-sweet bed were change indeed from her bare little comfortless Hospital quarters.



## THE ARRIVAL.

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Here she was mistress of the space and warmth and ventilation of more than half a ward with its complement of twenty or more patients. The reflection oppressed her conscience, a conscience which through long association and sympathy with poverty had come to regard all luxury as being somewhat criminal. She shook off her luxurious mood and in a spasm of asceticism deserted the blazing zone of fire to resume her normal humour in the labours of unpacking.

The daughter of a clergyman of narrow means and generous impulses, she had been always stinted of material things. When she was younger she had been too imaginative and high-spirited to realise that she was stinted. Later, by contrast with the really poor, she considered herself criminally rich.

She had been in the habit of passing her vacations with cousins of her father, persons of good stock and standing, who made her pleasantly welcome. Their lives were as busy as hers, a ceaseless round of gaieties, which exacted as much in nerve wear-and-tear as did her hospital activities. But in their cases, so it appeared to her, with no other result than the consumption of superfluous food, the perpetual donning and doffing of superfluous clothes, the superfluous, ceaseless ministrations of servants and horses.

Her unpacking completed, she crept with a sigh of contentment between the smooth, cool sheets, inhaled pleasantly their lavender atmosphere, and believing herself upon the point of falling immediately asleep from sheer fatigue, found herself unnaturally wide awake from the same cause.

The day's doings ebbed and flowed in waves of consciousness upon her brain. Pages of hospital life reopened and demanded to be lived again. The problem of her new career resumed its burr-pricks. She had lifted a window, and the wash of the sea somewhere near mingled with her thoughts. A sharp air quickened the warm air of the room.

After two hours of weary tossing, she rose with the intention of closing the window. Perhaps the unaccustomed wash of the sea replacing the accustomed roar of London was responsible for her wakefulness. She felt her way

across the room and drew aside a blind. All was formless darkness save for a quadrangle of light reflected from the hall upon the drive, now spread with a thin drugget of snow. A quick step under her window caught her ears. A man's form emerged for a moment from the darkness into the quadrangle of light and disappeared.

She heard a bell ring in the house. A few minutes later the sound of footsteps and a man's voice became audible in the corridor outside. A sense of quietude and rest stole over her. She fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER VI.

## NURSE HANSON.

The man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life and is pursuing a descending and darkening way.

SHE awoke early. Not to the clang of a bell, but to an odd grating sound, rather like the creaking of an unoiled hinge. It came intermittently. She lay drowsily listening for it, mystified as to its source. In the intervals the stillness was profound, so profound as to seem palpable.

The rhythmic lap of the sea upon a beach further materialised the silence by making that silence seem to be tidal. Again that odd grating! Her limbs felt leaden. From head to foot she ached. It was as though the unaccustomed calm allowed her to hear complainings of an over-tired body, complainings which the familiar city roar had drowned.

She summoned her forces of will. She opened her heavy lids and sat up.

Three parallelograms of cold light outlined the windows. At the borders she could just discern small rampant beasts. The chairs and other furnishings showed ghostly in the creeping light. A tiny heart of red nested amid the black caked cinders in the grate.

Again that mystifying sound! She dragged herself up. It sounded close beneath her windows. She drew aside a curtain.

She started back with the sense of an intruder. It was

as though she had broken in upon a white and sacred mystery —the mystery of the maiden morning's toilette.

A sea fog swathing the scene as with linen raiment was slowly unrolling itself before a gentle wind. As it unfolded, the earth emerged, slipping bit by bit sleepily and shivering into a green dress. All was mysterious and hushed. While day dressed, night could be seen in the distance wrapping her dishevelled garments round her and stealing away.

As her eyes grew tolerant of the light she saw that the traceries of leafless trees about the house, strongly black against the mist, were beaded with heavy drops. Night had been visited by grief and had bathed the earth with tears.

The source of the sounds which had so puzzled her became apparent in a fine cock-pheasant which, its sleek body richly plumed, stood perched upon a rail scolding the house for being still asleep. Uttering a last cry it rose suddenly in the air, and, with a sharp clapping of wings, its long tail drooped, it flew heavily away and disappeared in a plantation.

She dropped the curtain and returned to bed. She had an odd sense of being all at once a stranger to herself amid these strange surroundings.

A clock in the corridor chimed a subdued musical quarter past an hour. Presently steps began to steal about the house. Below her a great bolt was shot back with a thud. Soon a knocking came upon her door. A velvet-footed maid brought tea, drew back her curtains and spread the arrangements for her bath. Did she wish her fire relighted? Breakfast would be ready in the morning-room at half-past eight.

She declined the fire with decision. The tea was outrage sufficient to her Spartan principles. Nevertheless she drank and found it grateful. But, as though in revenge for the outraged principles, its warmth and refreshment took toll in a languor which made getting up a hardship. She sprang out of bed to shake off the insidious mood. Even the unwonted luxury of a bath in her room instead of a bath which necessitated a run down a flight of draughty steps, and a more or less lengthy awaiting of her turn, presented itself in the light of sybaritism.

Whilst taking it she braced herself by repeating an inscription which Thoreau has recorded as being inscribed upon the bath-tub of King Tching-thang. She knew nothing of the monarch beyond the maxim of his bath-tub, but this she approved.

"Renew thyself completely each day. Do it again and again and forever again."

It seemed to enjoin that despite the temptations she began to foresee in her new environment, she should nevertheless renew completely each day that self she had grown to regard as her true and better self, the self which forgot self in remembering others. She determined that, should her duties not fill her time, she would find further duties. Experience had shown her that such would not be far to seek.

Emerging from her bath, her body, with white limbs dripping, confronted her from a tall mirror. Mystery was added to it by the slight steaming of its moist warmth upon the chilly air. She stood regarding it as one regards a statue, surprised into admiration by its beauty. To the beauty of the statue—nobility of form and modelling—were added the vitality of life, the charm of movement, the rich whiteness of supple, living skin. She withdrew herself suddenly beyond range of the mirror. The reflection jarred with her creed, flouted her Spartan abnegations. The beautiful person suggested vaguely that she had been framed to higher purposes than those merely of utility. A waste of fine design and workmanship were otherwise declared. For why fashion a beautiful vase where a plain platter would have equally served?

She did not return to the glass until the person it had shown was once more concealed within conventional clothing—the self to which she was accustomed.

She twisted her brown hair into a neat coil and knotted it beneath her nurse's cap. With the candid country light upon her, she realised the startling pallor of her face, discovered tired lines about her mouth and eyes, foreshadowings of those furrows wherein age inters youth.

Then she forgot herself in a sudden eagerness to begin upon her day's work, and to decide once and for ever the ques-

tions she had asked herself so frequently about her new life.

A glimpse as she opened her windows showed her a stretch of wooded park, with a mountain in the distance, shrouded to the shoulder still with mists. On one side a curved, smooth sea with a shadowy sail here and there upon it. She passed briskly from her room along the corridor and down the staircase. The glooming ancestors of the previous evening were now alert and open-eyed, brave in armour, or in doublet and hose, their ladies beside them with ringlets and plumed hats, or in Court dress with bare shoulders and pearls.

The stairway was obscure, its light mellowed by a stained glass window presenting the Judgment of Paris. The white forms of the three goddesses contending for the golden apple in the beau's hand recalled the vision of her mirror.

She smiled slightly as she went her way. It satisfied her love of truth that her dress was no mere cloak for ill-modelling.

A footman in drab and blue livery with handsome shoulder-knots, pioneered her to the morning-room.

"Miss Hanson has just gone in to breakfast, ma'am," he said.

In a room of charming greens, fronting smooth lawns, the back of a nurse in uniform showed standing at a window.

She turned as Camilla entered. She was tall and spare, of sallow complexion, with prominent teeth and prominent pale blue eyes.

"Oh, good morning," she said, shaking hands. She smiled effusively, exhibiting the professional cheerfulness of the nurse. But all the while her eyes were keen and busy, taking in the stranger's aspect. Her smile stiffened over with that film of ice which is the time-honoured tribute, though paid in hostility, of superior looks, a tribute which makes beauty occasionally wonder whether her possession is not out-weighed by its penalty of living for the most part among foes.

They exchanged conventional observations, upon Camilla's journey, upon the respective Institutions which had been the



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*Alma Mater* of each. Then breakfast coming, they sat down in amity.

"I take night duty. This is my supper," Miss Hanson announced.

"Would you like to change?" Camilla asked. "I have been three months on day duty, and if you wish——"

"Thank you, I don't," the other said promptly. "I prefer night duty. There is less to do, and as I require very little sleep it gives me half the day to walk and do as I like. I make a point of stipulating for night duty when possible in private nursing. I can't stand being fussed about by patients' relatives. They generally leave one beautifully alone at night."

Perhaps it occurred to her that selfishness leaked in the confession, for she added:

"And, of course, most nurses prefer day duty. So by my method everyone gets what she wants."

"Thank you," Camilla said, in acknowledgment of coffee the other passed to her in a cup of beautiful old china. "Is Lady Harland's an interesting case?"

"As a case or as a person?"

"Either."

"Then neither," the other returned with a slight grimace. "I don't believe she's had a symptom for years. She's gone on for the last ten years without a single new development —no temperature, no anything. Frightfully monotonous you'll think her if you're keen about your work. I'm not. I do what there is to be done. But it's my livelihood and I like it to be as comfortable as possible."

"But you like a good case, one that needs nursing and skill?"

"Indeed I don't," Miss Hanson laughed. "I prefer to be comfortable. There's a great deal of nonsense talked about nursing. Nurses are only like other persons. I didn't take up nursing for love or philanthropy. I had to earn my living, and nursing seemed a feasible way. Are you shocked? Perhaps you have means of your own and can afford to indulge notions. I can't. Unless I marry I shall go on nursing till I'm incapacitated. In the meantime give me as easy a life as I can get."

"Nursing is my livelihood too," Camilla said, "but I cannot see that because one's work is repaid by a salary the work loses interest or"—she hesitated upon the word—"or fineness. One does the work. The salary comes as a consequence. The work is the main thing."

Miss Hanson helped herself to a second plate of partridge and tongue.

"With me," she retorted, "the salary is the main thing. And as far as that goes," she added in a slightly disagreeable tone, "I daresay I do my work as well as people who profess more. My doctors and patients always send for me again."

There being nothing to be said to this Camilla was silent. Not a little chilled and mortified before a prospect of uncongenial companionship, her eyes travelled past her new acquaintance through the window.

"The grounds seem to be beautiful," she said amicably.

"They are," Miss Hanson assented, good-humoured again. "I'm devoted to walking. You can knock about for hours here without ever going out of the Park. I've been here two years. I never before had such a comfortable berth."

"Is Sir Nigel Harland nice?" Camilla asked.

The other glanced at her sharply. "He's odd," she said, "but I believe he's very clever. I can't quite make him out. I suppose he's difficult to understand. He's had a life of it, I should think, with her ladyship."

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## CHAPTER VII.

## THE INVALID.

Our own deeds are our own doomsmen.

BREAKFAST over, they repaired together upstairs, Camilla to make the acquaintance of her patient and to begin upon her new duties, Nurse Hanson on her way to bed.

"When you've once dressed her—and it takes a good two hours—you haven't very much to do—on her good days—but to undress her, which takes another good two hours," Miss Hanson said, preceding her colleague along the corridor. She halted, waiting until the latter had come up with her. She scanned her face.

"Perhaps you think I ought to undertake either dressing or undressing," she submitted. "But you see both come into the day hours from nine till nine. And as I told you I always stipulate for night duty. You have the advantage of normal hours."

"I have not complained," Camilla said.

"No," her guide retorted, going on again, "there's no reason why you should. You get normal working hours and sleep at night. Most people would consider me the martyr."

Camilla almost exclaimed upon the luxurious aspect of the patient's room. It was a flare of pinks and sheeny satins. The chairs and couches were of pink brocaded satin, the carpet of rich rose. The walls were hung with exquisite art-needlework, pourtraying the four Seasons upon satin panels. The slim, æsthetic maidens were more or less nude

amid voluminous draperies, and each was embowered by typical flowers.

The curtains at the windows were of rose-pink muslin, through which a tinted twilight filtered. Ferns and plants and bowls of cut flowers, a mass of delicate bloom, stood ranged in the corridor, where a gardener had placed them. As the nurses entered, Lady Harland's maid, a tall, elderly woman of grim aspect, was carrying them one by one into the room.

Camilla's glance sped interested to find her patient. She lay in a great four-posted bedstead, upholstered in pink satin, inner curtains of rose muslin surrounding her with filmy colour-clouds. She betrayed neither sign nor movement as Camilla, under convoy of the other nurse, approached. Only a pair of opaque blue eyes, fixed dully upon her, showed cognizance of her presence. The eyes seemed cloudy from lack of intelligence, but they harboured a gleam of antagonism.

Camilla imagined a sudden aversion to herself in the antagonism. She learned later that it was the chronic expression. The patient's small wisp of a body scarcely showed an outline on the bed clothes. She lay inert and motionless. Even when Miss Hanson, stooping down to her, said in a raised voice:

"This is Miss Braeburn, your new nurse, Lady Harland," she did not stir an eyelid. Only the dull antagonism of the eyes, deepening a shade, seemed to receive the stranger into her consciousness as another foe.

She remained staring up at her with a fixed malevolence which the stranger found supremely discomfiting, conveying as it did an impression of personal dislike. Of the motionless body, all that seemed alive was the spark of evil in the eyes. The effect was uncanny in the extreme.

Camilla followed Miss Hanson to the door.

"I am afraid she has taken a dislike to me," she said, distressed.

"Oh, she always looks like that," Miss Hanson said. "One doesn't know how much she feels or understands. My own opinion is that she knows very much more than they think. I believe half the time she's only pretending not to



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understand when really she's as cunning as a weasel. Well, good-night. Benson, the maid, will show you what there is to be done."

It was a gruesome enough task to which Benson, having completed her transport of flower-bowls and pots, initiated her. The wasted body, limp and lifeless, was bathed bit by bit, and with the utmost care, the patient crying out sharply with pain upon all but the gentlest most gradual movement.

Each joint and limb having been carefully kneaded, was swathed in unguented lint and rolled in flannel. Then the patient was slowly and painfully manœuvred into elaborate under garments, extravagantly frilled and be-ribboned. No detail of the dress of a woman of fashion and in full possession of her powers was omitted. The poor body was even encased in corsets, specially designed and cut, and the cords drawn to some degree of tightness.

All the while the eyes stared with their stupid malignity, though from a dull, complacent expression, which stole gradually upon the face, it was plain the sufferer derived some satisfaction from her toilette.

The thin wisps of faded hair were brushed and waved into an elaborate coiffure by Benson, her matter-of-fact face showing precise and business-like above the process, as though long habit had effaced intelligent recognition of it as a dismal farce.

Quite seriously and with an expert hand she set two rouge spots on the sallow cheeks, and dusted a film of powder over all. Then she brought two elaborate tea-gowns from a wardrobe, and, raising a blind in order that their respective claims to choice should be fully revealed, she ballooned out their folds and remained with them so spread for her mistress's decision.

A gleam of interest displaced the evil of the eyes. Then the lids dropped obdurately. She would have neither of them.

She decided eventually upon an amber satin, richly embroidered with black. She signified her choice by fixing her gaze on the one selected, and emitting a thin, crooning sound.

When she had been put into it with difficulty to her attendants, and with pain to herself as her moaning testified, she selected the jewels she would wear, a necklace and tiara of emeralds and diamonds, with rings and brooches to match.

All being finished an ingenious ambulance was slipped beneath her, and she was borne slowly and gently to a couch beside the fire, the ambulance so fitting into hooks on the couch as to support her at all points in a half-reclining posture.

Benson adjusted a mirror attached to one side of it, in such manner that it reflected her face, and with a sigh, denoting an arduous business well over, left the staring eyes to reward themselves for the pains of the poor body.

Camilla, assisting in the straightening of the room, asked in an undertone why the patient should have been distressed by an elaborate toilette.

"She would surely be better left quietly in bed," she said, "or at all events only slipped into a loose, warm dressing-gown."

Benson listened grimly.

"We should have a nice life of it with her," she replied; "we've tried it several times by the doctor's orders, and she's just worried all day fit to drive you mad. She knows what she wants and she knows how to get it—has done all her life. I've been with her ever since she was married to Sir Nigel—more than twenty years. She always thought all the world of dress. And it's stuck to her."

A clock outside striking,

"That's only eleven," she went on. "We're earlier than usual. You're quicker than the last nurse. We've a clear hour before Sir Nigel comes. He comes every day at twelve, and reads his letters to her, and tells her the news."

"Does she understand?"

"Whether she does or whether she doesn't," Benson returned, "Sir Nigel never misses. It's his way."

Camilla glanced about the richly ornate room. Its smartness and modernness were an anomaly in the old-world house.



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"I suppose the room has been furnished to please her," she said. "He must be fond of her."

Benson closed her thin lips sourly. She glanced to where her mistress sat in the amber gown and emeralds, staring with dull, malignant eyes upon her reflection in the glass.

"It's scarcely in nature," she said.

The patient began to moan.

"She wants scent on her handkerchief," Benson interpreted, "Or she wants the glass shifted so that she can get another view."

Camilla went quickly to her. She placed a hand upon the mirror and glanced at her inquiringly. The malice in the eyes sparkled. The withered lids dropped obdurately. Camilla removed her hand from the mirror and brought one of a row of handsome scent-bottles from the dressing-table. The eyes glanced at it. The lids dropped.

Camilla appealed to Benson.

"It must be something else she wants. She closed her eyes when she saw the scent."

"It's the wrong scent then," Benson said, without looking up.

Camilla did not wholly accept the explanation, for was not the proof of the scent in the smelling? And she had not even unstoppeder it.

However, she found among the bottles one of which the liquid was coloured heliotrope. With enlightenment she selected that.

Her intuition proved aright. The patient permitted her handkerchief and her gown to be sprinkled with this.

Nurse Hanson was right. The dull eyes saw more than might have been suspected.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

**SIR NIGEL.**

Ah ! if the rich were rich as the poor fancy riches !

Two minutes before the stable clock struck twelve Benson moved up a chair beside her mistress's lounge. Two minutes after the clock had struck twelve a knock sounded upon the door and a man entered.

Camilla had expected Sir Nigel to come, as Benson had said it was his habit, but the man who entered was so widely different from the vague preconception she had formed of her patient's husband that until Benson, respectfully stiffening to attention, whispered her "Here is Sir Nigel!" she had decided that he was perhaps the doctor.

A man verging it might be upon fifty, but in the prime of life, vigorous, alert and keen-eyed, of a clear, youthful complexion, the head finely formed and imaginative, the hair slightly reddish and greying above the ears, the nose aquiline and aristocratic, showing breeding and imperiousness, the mouth, beneath a strong and reddish moustache, mobile, sensitive, humorous. He brought a little storm of nervous energy into the languid air of the sick-room.

His eyes, alert and penetrating, found the stranger in a moment. Paper and letters in hand he moved up to his wife's chair and laid a hand lightly upon one of hers. Then he turned and went to meet Camilla as she advanced up the long room. Seriously and ceremoniously he shook hands with her, his penetrating eyes upon her.

"Dr. Hawker has written to me about you," he said "My

wife is fortunate in securing your services. I hope you may be induced to remain."

Camilla had already learned from Benson of a long succession of nurses, some of whom had deserted at the end of a month. They complained that the patient got upon their nerves.

She echoed his wish pleasantly and with confidence. He bowed slightly and, returning up the room, took the chair beside the invalid's couch.

"A letter from Victoria," he announced cheerfully, selecting from a little sheaf of envelopes in his hand. To his interrogating glance the patient closed her eyes upon Victoria. He set Victoria's letter aside.

"From Harold?"

The lids betrayed no interest in Harold.

"From Lady Gwendolyn?"

"From Eustace?"

"From Emma Stratford?"

The lids fell after emitting a gleam of curiosity.

He proceeded to read Emma Stratford's letter.

Camilla had withdrawn to the further end of the long room, but his voice, clear and resonant, brought scraps of social gossip, a family scandal, the announcement of the engagement of Mary.

"So poor Mary after fourteen years of the grindstone under Emma has at last found respite," he commented with an ironic laugh.

Two other letters the eyes permitted him to read. Camilla was too far away to discern their action, but she noted his announcement of names, his questioning pause, and his proceeding to read or to throw one aside. Coming to the end of the correspondence, he skimmed scraps from the *Times*. He selected light, social paragraphs, the illness (announced with becoming regret) of the Duchess of Stratford, an accident in the hunting-field to a well-known M.F.H., the birth of another daughter to a neighbouring potentate. As he read Camilla could see that he turned his eyes at intervals upon the rouged, expressionless face.

What he found there sometimes—no doubt the chilling dropped lids with which she had made acquaintance—moved

him to break off short in his readings, and to turn to something else.

Sometimes he continued to the end, and at such times she concluded the dull eyes had remained open. From where she sat, shaping lint and preparing bandages for the evening's dressings, his fine voice and cultured enunciation gave values she had hitherto missed in language.

Socialist as she had grown in spirit she realised that nothing but generations of exclusive culture could have evolved his distinction of diction. In quality it was as high above the studied and, it must be confessed, stilted enunciation of the College Don, as the College Don's enunciation is above that of the cockney. Yet it was purely spontaneous, without effort or self-consciousness.

All highly bred persons do not speak so, her socialist spirit insisted. At her cousins' houses she had heard very exalted persons use slang epithets and even comport themselves indolently as regarded aspirates.

In the midst of her reflections there came a sudden silence. The door of the room closed quietly. Sir Nigel had gone.

The patient began to moan distressedly. Camilla went to her. She lay with her lids closed, moaning and beating a languid hand upon an arm of her chair.

Benson had quitted the room soon after Sir Nigel had arrived. Camilla felt nonplussed, ignorance of her habits and the limited means of communication with the speechless patient baffling her.

To her inquiries, "Can I do anything for you, Lady Harland?" "Is there anything you would like?" she paid no heed. She remained with closed eyes moaning and beating the languid hand.

Camilla thought she even raised the pitch of her distress, as though to drown or to mark her irritation at the questions. She tried all possible expedients. She brought scent. She brought some of the medicated biscuits which formed part of the invalid's diet. She hastily warmed a cup of chicken broth and so placed it that its savoury steaming should announce its presence to the sufferer's nostrils.

All to no purpose. The distressful sounds persisted.

Camilla began to understand that rapid march-past of her predecessors. She moved to the bell with the intention of sending for Sir Nigel. His going had been obviously the origin of the distress. At that moment Benson returned. She glanced so unconcernedly at her mistress that Camilla at once perceived that the phenomenon was an accustomed one.

"I was going to send for Sir Nigel," she said in an undertone. "Lady Harland began to moan the moment he left. I have tried everything I could think of to quiet her. I thought she might perhaps wish to tell him something."

"Never do that," Benson said with a hard glance toward her. "She'd keep him at it all day long if she was allowed."

"Perhaps a word from him would comfort her," Camilla said. It distressed her to see a poor soul so distressed.

"He's done his duty for the day," Benson retorted doggedly. "It's hard enough upon him as it is. She'd start again the moment he'd left. She'd go on like it all day if she was humoured."

"Do you think she is fond of him?" Camilla asked.

Benson gave a contemptuous click of the tongue.

"There was little enough sign of it when there might have been," she said, snapping her mouth like a steel trap upon the words as though they held verminous recollections.

She went about her duties with an adamant face. Camilla remained troubled by a distress for which she could devise no remedy. After a while the sharp unpleasant moans began to stab her senses, spots in her brain on which the mindless iteration fell, growing wearied and hyper-sensitive. Even Benson at last broke out impatiently.

"Let us try her with a fresh tea-gown."

Camilla wondered how intelligence of it was to be conveyed through the obstinately closed eyes. But Benson had learned in the school of experience. Opening a great drawer she unwrapped from many folds of tissue paper a gorgeous creation in pale blue silk adorned with embroideries. Taking it in her arms she went and stood before her mistress. There she shook and fluttered it till the rich rustling fell upon her ears. The moans grew more subdued. The eyes opened.

They remained fascinated by the blue resplendence. The moans ceased. The eyes lifted to Benson's inquiring ones.

Benson sighed.

"We shall have to put her into this," she said wearily.

The labours of an hour earlier were renewed. The patient was borne back to bed, the amber satin gown was removed amid groans and sharp outcries. The blue magnificence was adjusted in its stead.

She was carried again to her lounge beside the fire, and the mirror tilted so that the dull eyes could reward themselves for sufferings. It was not long before carriage wheels were heard beneath the window. "I declare," cried Benson, "of course, it's Friday. And Dr. Brattleton comes in the mornings on Friday. That," she told Camilla in an undertone, "was the reason she wanted another gown before the afternoon."

There was a sound of ceremonious ushering outside. The doctor knocked and entered.

A tall tired-looking man with dark eyes and thick silver hair, he wore a serious expression, and a very long coat. His eyes told of broken rest. He bowed solemnly to the new nurse. He moved up to the patient with a velvet stride. He laid a finger gently upon her pulse and, taking out his watch, remained for some moments like one in deep reflection, frowning deeply.

The nearest approach to a smile Camilla had seen on Lady Harland's part stole out upon her face. The dull eyes lighted a little, staring up at him. She beat her free hand lightly up and down upon a knee. Throughout her dim intelligence was manifest a sense that here was somebody duly interested in her.

His frown relaxed. Gently he relinquished the hand he had been holding and restored it to its arm of the chair. He bent down and submitted in a soft whisper:

"And how is her ladyship this morning?"

The lids dropped with a self-pitying complacency.

"Ah! not so well," he interpreted. "Dear me, and what is it that is wrong?"

There was an infinitesimal motion at the hem of the gold-embroidered skirt.

"The poor foot again?" he said with commiseration. He turned to Camilla. "Kindly allow me to examine her ladyship's foot, Nurse."

Camilla stooped and unfastened a small shoe. She drew off an embroidered stocking. She removed a bandage, removed a square of lint. The poor shrunken member was bared to his inspection.

He exchanged the glasses on his nose for another pair. He knelt down and fixed a contemplative gaze upon the foot, the patient's eyes the while watching him intently. He took it gently into a hand. The patient gave a little shriek of pain.

"Dear, dear," he said soothingly. "Is it so bad?"

He bade Benson bring his bag from where he had set it on a table. Impressively he took out several bottles and studied the labels. He selected the last. He replaced the others, uncorked this, and, finding a camel-hair pencil in his bag, he moistened it from the bottle and made two cabalistic signs in dark fluid upon the suffering instep.

Then he replaced the lint and rising from his knees instructed "Nurse" to re-swathe the foot in its bandage and stocking. While she did so he drew from Benson a circumstantial report of the patient's condition during the preceding twelve hours. What food had she taken? And why had she not drunk all her chicken-broth at 6.30 a.m.? How had she slept? Had her sleep been disturbed? At what hour had she wakened? Had she seemed refreshed? Had the windows in the corridor outside remained raised three inches during the night as he had instructed? Had the patient taken her soothing draught at eleven the previous night and her tonic at eleven that morning?

To most of these interrogations Benson replied grimly. Meanwhile the patient with that same lightening of her eyes and the pitiful twist of the lips, which was all that remained of the power of smiling, seemed to be listening intently. He advanced the time for the administration of the soothing draught and of the tonic by a few minutes. He instructed that a former ointment should be again tried. He thought as her ladyship had left half her chicken broth that veal broth might be substituted, veal broth made with one-third milk and

a teaspoonful of fresh cream added. The window in the corridor, as the frost had passed, might be opened six inches.

He laid a large hand respectfully upon her ladyship's brows. He enquired whether they throbbed. She dropped her lids self-consciously. "Then we must ask Nurse," he said, "to be good enough to bathe them with a little eau-de-Cologne and water."

It was over at last, this professional visit with its grave and punctilious dignifying of details. He laid a hand in leave-taking upon one of the patient's. He drew himself lingeringly away.

Camilla accompanying him to the door his manner changed. In ordinary tones he asked her a few practical questions as to her training. Dr. Hawker, her sponsor, had at one time been also his chief. He hoped she would remain. The case was one of the most interesting cases on record. It was a veritable triumph of surgery. The life of the patient had hung by a hair's breadth in the balance. Then science had stepped in and operated. That was ten years ago, and here she was still living. A triumph truly of modern science! He repeated his hope that Camilla would remain. He was tired of the rapid change of nurses. The patient was perhaps a little—— He raised his eyebrows, smiled and departed.

Immediately the patient, as though to supply the hiatus he had left unfilled, began again to moan, and refused to be comforted.

She was still moaning when Camilla, leaving her in Benson's charge, descended to the morning-room for lunch. She dropped into a chair, and with the echo of the moanings stabbing at her brain wondered drearily, despite Dr. Brattleton's exhortations, how long it would be before she should follow her predecessors. Never in all her experience nor during all her years of drudgery had she felt so broken-spirited.

A cold touch came upon her hand, a bristly muzzle pushed itself into a palm. She looked down to find a liver and white spaniel wagging its thick silken tail vigorously beside her.

The muzzle released itself, the brown eyes fastened upon



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hers with a languishing stare. She stooped and caressed the beautiful silken head.

"You are a sweet dog," she said. "And you seem to have taken a liking to me, you dear!"

She felt comforted. Here at least was one warm heart for her amid the strange and chilling novelties of the house. The dog, encouraged by her voice and her caresses, lifted itself on its hind legs, placed two heavy entreating paws upon her chest and implored her with an agonised appeal.

"Now, what do you want?" she demanded.

That the creature besought something of her was manifest in every eloquent line of its silken body, and in its yearning eyes.

She took a biscuit from the table. The dog averted its head with ill-concealed disgust.

She opened a window. The dog flung up to her the look one flings to a fool. It ambled to the door, frisking and wagging its tail and looking back for her to follow. It emitted short, inviting barks. It returned, and, catching the hem of her skirt between its teeth, proceeded to tow her gently forward.

She submitted—remembering stories of sagacious creatures who had called attention in such wise to fires and injured persons. The dog was obviously in distress and attempting to communicate some pressing desire.

She allowed it to draw her gently from the room, across the hall and into a corridor. It stopped before a door and stood there frisking and wagging its tail. It barked at the door commanding it to open.

Camilla rather trepidant—for the dog might have been purposely excluded—softly turned the handle.

The creature wriggled violently through, forcing the aperture. She heard it bound eagerly forward on the other side, whining and barking as though delirious with joy.

Then a clear voice said with a fine enunciation which she recognised :

"What! Fanny, is this you? You wilful dog. How did you get in? Will not even a closed door keep you from your master?"

## CHAPTER IX.

## SHINGLE BAY.

The Wiser a man is, the more will he be a Worshipper of the Deity.

RECUPERATED by lunch, taken in the solitude and quiet of the charming morning-room, with its refreshing outlook upon lawns and tall trees etching a pellucid sky, she was returning to the sick room when a footman stopped her.

"The carriage will be round at three, ma'am," he said.

"The carriage?"

"Her ladyship's nurses drive every afternoon," he said.

"It's Sir Nigel's wish," Benson explained. "He thinks you ought to have a break in the day; Miss Hanson sometimes gets up in time for it."

"But Lady Harland——?"

"She sleeps mostly all the afternoon, and I do my sewing here. The doctor comes all days but Fridays soon after two, and all days but Fridays my time off is from twelve till two."

The patient had been propped with pillows. Benson had spread the eider-down quilt above her and she was sleeping. The lids had dropped half open upon upturned eyes. The jaw and mouth had fallen. Save for her slow and slightly stertorous breathing, she might have been a dead woman. The rouge-spots on her cheeks showed ghastly. Through the drawn, sallow skin were traces of a symmetry of feature, remotely suggestive of former prettiness.

Camilla, standing beside her, could not repress a little shudder. Benson's black eyes detected it.



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"Oh! you'll get used to her," she said. "You've got more grit in you, I should think, than most of them."

"Has she been long ill?"

"Fifteen years. It was a tumour in the brain, and the doctors trepanned and took it out."

"Does Dr. Brattleton think she will live long?"

Benson emitted a slight snort.

"There's no telling what he thinks," she said. "But there's no more reason why she should die than there is that her bedstead there should die. She isn't much more alive, and she's very much wickeder."

"Oh! poor thing!" Camilla said, shocked.

The woman did not trouble to condone her criticism. She went on grimly sewing lace upon an under-garment of her lady's.

Camilla, observing her across the room, noted the stoop in her gaunt frame, a piebald patch of white, like the imprint of a searing hand, brinded into her black hair, ominous bleach spots in a colour naturally high.

"Fifteen years chained—to that!" she reflected compassionately, glancing from her to the couch. She forgave her her hardness.

Miss Hanson did not join her in her drive, to Camilla's relief. She felt a need to be alone, to *find* herself amid the strangeness of her new surroundings.

When she had taken her seat in the cosy victoria:

"Where to, ma'am?" the footman submitted, as though he had been an automaton and incapable of realizing that the neighbourhood was new to her.

"I don't know the place," she said. "If there is a drive beside the sea——"

"Certainly, ma'am," he returned with an obsequious alacrity which suggested that had there previously been no drive beside the sea, from that moment it would have existed.

"Shingle Bay?" the coachman mumbled respectfully from the box. He did not turn his head.

"Shingle Bay, ma'am," the automaton repeated.

"Yes, please drive to Shingle Bay."

He touched his hat and sprang to the box. The coach-

man assumed the air of importance contingent upon driving to Shingle Bay. The horses pranced forward.

A little distance from the house, the drive ran through a grove of planes and beeches. The tall stems made aisles of silence and mysterious twilight. On many of the trees last year's leaves still clung, richly brown. Their trunks were greened with filmy mosses. Beneath them dead leaves and ivy blanketed the winter sleep of myriad plant lives, which with the turn of the year had begun to turn again to life.

The clear day and the sunshine drew odours pungent and vital from the damp earth.

The carriage plunged suddenly out of the twilight into a crystalline daylight. It wound through an expanse of grassland, neither lawn nor moor, though smooth of surface almost as the one, and rough in formation as the other. Hillock and hollow flanked the level drive. Here and there were abrupt breaks in the surface, showing backbone and ribs of rock immediately within the verdure.

Masses of gorse, compact and firm enough to stand upon, rose in fantastic shapes as though they had been clipped artificially. Mechanically munching the short grass, their jaws awist, sheep of a superior breed lifted narrow white faces, and stared blankly at the carriage.

Now a whiff of salt in the air stung her cheek. Through gaps she caught glimpses of the sea, blue and smooth, as though painted upon canvas, with a foam like a white fringe at its edge.

She threw off the oppression of the pink satin sick-room, its heat and heavy air, its pitiful occupant, rouged and tricked out in elaborate fineries. She drew in the strong breath of nature, and, stirred by its vigorous freshness, the weakness of flight which had begun to cloud her mind evaporated.

Approaching the lodge-gates she heard the sound of shots. The figures of three men showed suddenly above a stone fence.

Sir Nigel and another, with a smart gamekeeper holding two dogs in leash, appeared in animated conversation. The gamekeeper was pointing a hand.

At the sound of wheels Sir Nigel turned. Coachman

and footman saluted. Sir Nigel lifted his tweed forage-cap to Camilla. Then he turned back to his deliberations.

Seen from that distance his firm-knit, elastic frame gave him the appearance of a man much younger than he was. Her thought, reverting to the sick-room, contrasted him with that she had left sleeping there. The contrast was striking, but it roused in her no other sense than that of incongruity. It did not occur to her that a man apparently so well equipped by life and fortune might be subject for sympathy. Pain which was not poorly clad and undernourished appealed to her but little. She had not realized that to subtler woes may belong more poignant, because subtler, griefs.

Shingle Bay was worth the visit. It was remarkable for being the one stretch of shingle amid miles of sandy and rock-rough coast.

The fawn-coloured beach stood curved in tiers like a huge amphitheatre, smooth and clean and fanned by breezes. Almost a perfect semi-circle, in the sheltered guard of its enclosing horns, the sea lay blue and smiling, its wash imparting no more motion than a filmy foam as of delicate fluttering lace at the rounded edge.

Nothing disturbed the harmony of curves, not a rock nor a strand of weed. Only a few gulls, ocean's doves, touched to silvery whiteness by the sunlight, floated and dipped in the blue.

The carriage stopping in order that she might enjoy the view, she descended, and while the coachman walked the horses up and down the road, she made her way to the shore. This was no easy task owing to its steep tiers of stones which slid with a harsh, tearing sound at every step.

Arrived at the water's edge, she stood in silence looking out to the horizon.

Little waves lapped the shore and broke into foamy laughter, kissing and smiling and gurgling as though here Nature were still in her infancy. Across the blue, briny airs wafted balmy and sweet as a baby's breath. The silence was broken only by the cries of the gulls, which now wheeled scolding above her. She stood lost in thought, her

feet on the strand, her soul caught suddenly out of her body across the primeval calm. Religionists tell us of mystic moments wherein the mind, hitherto unillumined, becomes all at once flooded with divine revelation, a baptismal tidal wave with spiritual regeneration on its crest. Something of this came now to Camilla. Not altogether as the sectarians conceive of it—for to each soul, according to its needs and qualities, regeneration must come differently. Camilla's revelation took the form of a sudden illuminant perception of the divinity of Nature.

For the first time in her life she became aware of God in His earth, a Stupendous Presence, throned in the vast mysterious silence of that great amphitheatre, brooding above the blue, shining from every sea-washed, rounded face of every pebble, sounding from every lapping water drop of ocean, filling and over-filling the translucent chalice made by earth and sky.

She became conscious—not of sin, but of a habit of mind frayed and begrimed by the toil of life. She saw herself smirched with the mire, fouled by the evil breath of the evil life of a great city.

"There is," said Richard Jeffries, "a dust which falls upon the heart as on a shelf." This dust which is the attritus inevitable of lives grinding small in the mills of toil, with no sweet interludes of peace and space wherein to recruit, seemed now to her to clog her every pore, to becloud her mind's windows, to lie so thick upon her heart that could she, she might with a finger have written her name "as on a shelf" in the flocculent accumulation.

She felt such a need to cleanse herself of the defilement that an impulse took her to plunge into the sea to be there regenerate by baptism of Nature.

She drew deep breaths of the strong sweet air. She pulled off her gloves and dipped her hands into the water. Its coldness and salt cleanliness seemed to be conducted to her soul.

How long she indulged her mood she knew not. Such moments are not measured by time. She was aroused by the sound of approaching steps. The footman was scrambling toward her down the shingly steeps. While he



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did so he vainly attempted to preserve the impassive formality belonging to his cloth.

"Ma'am," he said respectfully, "Williams is afraid the horses may get chilled. It's getting late."

Such a slip from the sublime!

She dragged herself out of her mood. She had a sense of returning through seons of space—over leagues of ocean —back to Shingle Bay. She turned, and murmuring regret, began to reclimb the beach. She became aware that her hands were dripping. She drew out her handkerchief and dried them. Mechanically she put on her gloves.

The coachman sat stiffly on his box; his attitude expressed a civil remonstrance. He knew nothing of baptismal moods. He saw no more than mere stupidity, it may be, in the way she had stood staring as though she had never before seen a sight so common as the sea, forgetting that hundreds of pounds worth of horse flesh were risking their value through her lack of sense.

He drove back at a smart trot in which, had she been in a mood to notice it, she would have overheard rebuke.

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## CHAPTER X.

## TALK AND TEMPER.

A woman can never afford to be cross.

NURSE HANSON met her in the hall.

"My!" she cried, "you're nearly half an hour late. You must have got out and walked. Williams would never have kept his horses out so long unless you'd kept him. He *would* be angry."

"Perhaps he was," she answered, recalling his manner.

"Well! come to tea before you take off your things. It has been in some minutes, but I waited for you."

When they were drinking it before a cheerful blaze:

"Well, and how do you like your patient and your work?" her colleague enquired. "And do you think you will stay?"

"I have only been here a day," she answered smiling.

"That means you don't like it?"

"At all events, I have every intention of remaining," she said. Shingle Bay had put edge into her resolve.

"I'm glad you do. I'm sick of changes. But isn't the old lady a horror?"

Camilla made no reply.

"Still, there's no doubt it's a wonderful case. At the time the medical papers were full of it, I hear. If the operation had been put off even half an hour they say she could not have lived. Did Dr. Brattleton tell you it was a triumph of science?"

"Yes."

"He tells everybody that. He is as proud of it as though he had operated himself. It was he who sent for Sir Oliver to do it."

"If I had been the patient," Camilla said reflectively, "I would much have preferred to die."

Miss Hanson examined her perplexedly through her pince-nez. The reflection was evidently unintelligible to her.

"Oh well, you must admit," she returned, with a baffled expression, "it was a clever operation."

Camilla wished to learn something of the household of which she had become a member.

"Have the Harlands any sons and daughters?"

"Haven't you heard? But how should you, unless Benson told you. And Benson isn't fond of talking. No; there are no children, no heir, and the title after five or six hundred years will die out, unless, of course, Lady Harland should die and Sir Nigel should marry again. It's a great pity, but things like that happen in this world. They say he feels it frightfully."

"I suppose he would," Camilla assented indifferently. She had known cases which had seemed to her to be more deserving of pity, cases of men who had children of whom they were fond and for whom they could not get food; cases in which fathers had seen their children die by inches for the lack of means to procure a month's change of air for them.

"You and I, who haven't ancestral homes, as the novels call it," Miss Hanson put in shrewdly, "can't wholly understand. I don't think a house you rent, even though your people have always lived in it and you were born in it, can ever be the same. And here the books and pictures and all the valuable things have been handed down from generation to generation. I should think you might grow to feel as though they were a part of you, you know."

"Perhaps so," Camilla said, interested and surprised. She had not given her colleague credit for possessing so much perception. We pass our lives, despite such surprises, in failing to credit our fellows with faculties they possess. More especially this is the case when they are antipathetic to us. Sympathy is the only light by which the book of human nature may be read.

Miss Hanson having heartily and unreservedly enjoyed the pleasures of the tea-table became communicative. She drew up an easy chair to the fire and invited her companion to follow her example.

"Let us have a little cosy talk," she said. "We may as well be friendly. There isn't much society here. So we've got to make the most of one another."

With this not very delicate or cordial pretext for inviting confidence she fixed her large colourless eyes upon Camilla and inquired:

"Should you think Lady Harland had ever been pretty?"

Camilla thought "Yes." There were traces of good looks still.

"They say she was once extremely pretty. There's a portrait of her in the picture gallery in fancy dress. Fair, with nice features and a lovely complexion. But, of course, that might be only the artist's paint. She's dressed as a nymph or a shepherdess or something in blue and white with her hair curled and her arms and a good deal of chest showing. Her name is on the frame."

Camilla had so far been in but few of the rooms. She had not yet found the picture gallery. Sir Nigel, she observed, looked younger than she had expected. Lady Harland, she thought, must be older than he.

"Five or six years," the other said, "but it is supposed he did not know it at the time he married her. Being so fair she probably looked younger than she was. She had been rather a "rip" before he married her, they say, but it is thought he did not know that either at the time. You can't get anything out of Benson," she continued frankly, "although having been with her so many years she must know a great deal. I visit the Rectory people and the Brattletons—Mrs. Brattleton is such a nice woman—and I hear scraps here and there. 'Burke's Peerage' is in the library. I've looked up Sir Nigel Harland in it. But it doesn't say much about her. It only says 'married Geraldine Mary Louisa, third daughter of Lord Drumferline. No issue.'"

Camilla smiled at her ingenuousness.

"Burke, of course," she said, "would not mention her flirtations."

"I think they were more than flirtations," Miss Hanson insisted, with a significant shake of the head. "They say she was a great 'rip,' and that Sir Nigel had a time with her. In fact—I've heard all sorts of things."

Camilla returned to the sick-room. She was not superior to gossip, good-humoured and harmless, but the raking up of a light past against the unfortunate creature who had become her patient, helpless of body and clouded of brain, offended her taste. It had been all so long ago. Let the past bury the past, as the sinner's consciousness must have long since buried her misdeeds, if in truth there had been such.

The invalid was awake. A tray stocked with tea and cakes was brought by a footman to the door as Camilla entered. She took it from him and, carrying it into the room, set it upon the table beside the couch.

The sick woman's appetite was good. She was very exacting about her food, showing anger sometimes painful to witness when a distasteful dish had been set before her. Camilla was re-chilled by the antagonism of the eyes, meeting them afresh. She had always to remind herself that the aversion in them was impersonal. Life had ebbed so low, devolution so far occurred as to have uncovered primordial hate-instincts which higher water-marks of evolution submerge in normal persons.

She poured the invalid's tea with pleasant cheerfulness, and, lifting the cover of the dish of hot cakes which were made specially for her every afternoon, said :

"Here is your tea, Lady Harland. The cakes look *so* good."

The lids dropped obdurately. The frame remained motionless. She laid a persuasive hand on the sick woman's clammy one.

"Do drink your tea while it is warm," she exhorted. "And the cakes look *so* good."

Closed lids and stiffened frame, unresponsive as a wall of stone.

So she lay till Camilla, seeing no near prospect of yielding, set the tea-pot and the plate of cakes upon the hearth to keep warm until she should be in the humour for them.

She sat feeling oddly helpless, watching the impassive face for signs of capitulation.

"What is the matter?" Benson suddenly exclaimed beside her. "Oh, she's at that again," she added, realising how the case stood. She sighed wearily. "Now we're going to have trouble."

She went over to the patient and took her firmly by the arm.

"Your ladyship must take her tea," she said sharply. "It's getting cold. And you don't like your cream cakes when they're cold."

Not a sign of consciousness. The shut eyes and expressionless face might have belonged to a dead woman.

The maid lifted the cup of tea from where Camilla had placed it on the hearth and, putting a hand beneath the pillow, Camilla assisting her, she raised her mistress's head and set the cup to her lips.

There was a slight movement—it was difficult to determine whether of shoulder or of head. In a moment the cup was overturned, and a stream of tea was flooding the front of the beautiful gown. The delicate chiffon frills about the throat and chest were immediately soaked into a dingy mass.

Benson gave vent to an impatient exclamation. Camilla and she ran for towels and handkerchiefs to mop the spoiled finery.

"You've just ruined your beautiful dress," Benson cried crossly, as though to a naughty child. "And it's the prettiest you've got and the first time you've ever worn it."

Still not a sign. Only a slight twisting of the mouth, which showed like a smile of malicious triumph. She remained perfectly impassive the while they mopped and dried her, slipping handkerchiefs within the soddened gown in order to prevent staining and wetting of her elaborate under-garments.

She betrayed no more consciousness of all the ministrations nor of regret for her fault than a great ugly doll would have done. When they had finished their attentions, Benson bawling that the gown would need a new breadth and jabot:

"You might go down to the library, Miss Braeburn," she

enjoined, "and ask Sir Nigel if he will please to come up. He is the only one who can do anything with her when she's like this. Sometimes she'll refuse her food for days."

Camilla, lacking other guidance to the library, sought that door to which the dog had led her in the morning. She knocked several times, each time with increased force. There was no answer. She turned the handle and went in.

He sat before the fire lost in thought. A paper he had been reading had fallen upon his knees. He wore the light tweed suit in which she had seen him shooting earlier in the afternoon. A tea-tray stood beside him on a table.

The mingled lamp and fire lights shone upon his face, showing it sunk into lines of weary dejection. The eyes stared into the fire filmed, as it seemed, with hopelessness. She no longer wondered at his youthfulness. His mood set ten years to his age. While she hesitated whether to advance or to retire—such a mood as his face showed likes not intrusion—he detected her presence.

The reading-lamp made but a circumscribed circle of light in the large room, and she stood outside it in the darkness. The film dropped from his eyes. His mind flashed back from its abstraction.

"Who is there?" he demanded sharply, shooting a keen glance toward her into the gloom.

"I," she said, and moved into the light.

He rose with the quick courtesy of breeding. Their glances met—met with a sense of exchange. For a moment she was silent. Then she said:

"Sir Nigel, Lady Harland will not take her food. Benson wished me to tell you and to ask if you will be so good as to come up to her."

She caught the impression of a man who sighed soul-sickened, of a prisoner re-called to the treadmill, of a horse re-yoked to the grindstone. Yet he did not sigh, he suffered no finger of impatience to lift, not a line of peevishness to mark his features. He merely faced about with a ready "I will come!"

A moment later he was swiftly preceding her across the hall and up the stairs.

Arrived in the sick-room he went over at once to the invalid. Placing a hand upon one of hers:

"What is this?" he said. "You must drink your tea, of course, or you will be ill."

A tremor stirred the lids. They fell apart showing the clouded orbs with two little lance points of malice in them. He moved to the fire-place, and returning with the teapot and the plate of cakes he set them on the tray.

"See," he said buoyantly, "I will pour your tea for you. I know how you like it. You shall have an extra lump of sugar and defy old Brattleton."

His face lighted mischievously. There was the glee of a schoolboy in his voice.

The eyes looked on. A slight relenting seemed to pass into them as they watched the third lump of sugar conveyed with emphasis and dropped with a click into the cup. He raised the teapot high and let the steaming infusion describe a glistening arc of fragrant amber as it fell into the cup. Then, adding cream and stirring the brew with the cheerful clink of silver against china, he carried the cup cautiously to her lips.

"You'll find it excellent," he said. "When you have taken some I will sit here and drink a cup with you."

She gave an impression of assenting. She uttered a little crooning sound as though of satisfaction. Then suddenly Benson, who had been watching her with eyes like gimlets, exclaimed "Mind!"

In a moment there was that same rapid movement, though whether of head or of shoulder Camilla was still not quick enough to determine. But he, too, had been on the alert. He was just in time to save the cup from overturning. Some of the tea splashed over upon his hand. The eyes seemed to mock him with their gleaming points. The mouth again twisted with malice. But he set down the cup without a sign of vexation.

"If you are not thirsty," he said cheerfully, "at all events try your cream cakes. See, I cannot resist them."

He took a plate and a cake and, seating himself near, proceeded to eat with ostentatious satisfaction.

The gleaming eye points fastened upon him. As he ate

and they watched, a slight dribble, such as one sees drip from the mouth of a dog tempted by a tit-bit, moistened the twisting lips. Camilla hurriedly dried it with a handkerchief.

When he had eaten a portion of the cake he set another cake upon a plate and brought it to her. He broke off a bit and carried it to her lips. The lips shot out perversely, spurning it. The lids dropped obdurately.

For the first time in all those fifteen years, Benson told Camilla afterwards, he lost patience with her. A sudden flame glowed in his eyes. Leaning forward he set his two hands firmly on her shoulders.

"Geraldine," he said angrily, "it would do you all the good in the world if I were to shake you."

Immediately the eyes unclosed and remained staring into his. They gleamed with the fear of a wild creature startled for its safety.

The compressed lips fell loosely apart. Camilla saw her opportunity. Quick as thought she slid a hand beneath the invalid, raised her and carried the cup to her lips. She drank instinctively. The draught seemed to thaw her obduracy. When a cake was put into her hand she raised it to her mouth and ate with appetite. But as though to proclaim the fact that she was eating under brutal compulsion, she shut her eyes and recommenced moaning. So she lay moaning and eating, moaning and eating and drinking, two sparse channels of tears stealing down her shrunken cheeks.

Sir Nigel, abashed by his outburst of impatience, looked on with a serious, yet whimsical, expression. He seemed to be divided between satisfaction at the result of his manœuvre and mortification that he had been surprised into it.

"You seized the psychological moment, Nurse," he said, turning approvingly to Camilla.

He stood for some minutes watching the progress of the meal, with its distracting mingling of tears and moans and unmistakable relish. Camilla supervised it with the tact and dexterity of experience. Then, without a word, he turned and quitted the room.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE STORM.

The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic.

AFTER an undressing of the patient, hindered and harassed, according to Benson, by an accompaniment of cries and sulks more lavish than usual, Camilla had retired early. She had not waited for the meal which the nurses were in the habit of taking together, the supper of one, the breakfast of the other.

The quiet of her beautiful room, with its welcoming fire and the sound of the sea entering by a lifted window, filled her with the harmonies of a home-coming. She realised for the first time that in all her life of work she had lacked the repose and refreshment of a home. Her cell at the hospital, shared sometimes by a fellow-nurse, had been merely a sleeping-box, with little more in it of elegance or comfort than a horse's stable.

She had never murmured. Nobody was to blame. Heaven knew, such space as existed was better devoted to those sick poor than otherwise! Yet realising herself just then sick of soul and of body, and fatigued by the exertions and exactions of the day, she sank into a chair and broke into quiet grateful tears for this reposeful sanctuary of hers.

A bedroom is a temple, wherein, when the body is spent with the day's labours, the soul arises and celebrates the sacred rites of sleep and the renewal of life. She had no sooner breathed the lavender incense of her bed than, as



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though it had been an anodyne, she sank into dreamless slumber.

She awoke to the cry of the pheasant, to the multiple-voiced chorus of birds, congratulating themselves and one another upon the dawning of another day. She awoke to a hollow roaring. A high wind beat about the house. All night it had lashed the sea to fury. Now through its cavernous depths she could hear great ocean thunder and fret like a caged creature, chafing against the inexorable leash of tides.

In its roar was the menace of deluge and annihilation, could it but slip that leash.

With the coming of day the wind had swept onward, leaving the swollen rage to expend itself in fruitless bellowing and in the gnashing of white teeth. Now and again a wind-tag floated back and gave the seething monster further cuffs, whereat it skirled and spat and shot long, spiteful claws up the face of the beach. Such a spurt of wind brought a dash of rain, which sounded like the tap of petulant finger-tips upon Camilla's windows. "Come out! Come out!" they cried. "Come out and be young and play in the wind and the showers!"

The little rampant beasts upon the curtains by the open window quivered and palpitated in response. They too seemed to strain at the leash of immutable law.

Camilla rose and drew aside the blind. What a contrast to Shingle Bay! God no longer sat in His amphitheatre brooding above the blue, while the blue crept—soft and timid—to His Feet. The pebbles no longer reflected His Countenance from every fresh-washed, smiling face. He had withdrawn for a space to sit enthroned and hold His Illimitable Sway elsewhere. And, His Sway removed, the smiling blue reverted treacherously to savage beastdom, and all the round-faced pebbles barked and bit. Across the sky grey companies, disordered and ragged, chased one another or fled helter-skelter to the mountains.

The trees stood tossing their great arms, in despair rather than in battle, giant parents bewailing younger branches of their growth which lay dissevered at their feet. Tussocks of pine strewed the ground like torn-out wisps of hair.

The conflict had been long and furious. But Nature is prodigal, and presently when her gardeners should have come upon the scene and should have borne away the dead, the sun would shine again and the sea smile and the parent trees cease from their dishevelled lamentations, and set about replacing their lopped boughs.

There was something so grand and invigorating in this rough horseplay of Nature's forces, that the spirit of it, a spirit of primeval mischief, got into Camilla's mind. With a sudden sense of nerve elation she dressed quickly. Having donned an old washable gown and a cloak, she stole down the stairs and, unshuttering one of the long windows opening upon the lawn, she passed into the grounds.

The moment she had closed the door she felt herself seized by a score of rough and friendly hands, and dragged into the fray. The rain showered cold and refreshing in her face. The wind threw sinewy arms about her and, lifting her almost from her feet, drew and buffeted her through the mazes of a wild dance. The danger of falling boughs was over, all the weaklings had been tried, and those found wanting were already thrown.

So soon as she could break from her rough partners she escaped from the open lawns, where the frolic was at its wildest, and sought shelter in an avenue. Here, the tall over-arching trees, setting their backs against the wind, soughed with a soft sweep like that of a rocking-cradle, while the rustling boughs made little more sound than the brush against it of a mother's garments.

The thickly interlacing boughs protected her from the immediate onslaughts of rain, though gusts at intervals shook down upon her sudden drenching showers like spray-drifts. She exulted in them. The cold drops fresh from heaven seemed to flow into her dusty places. The wind and rain, entering at every pore, beat upon and cleansed the fogged windows of her mind. She felt her body all at once unburdened and exhilarated. Upborne by a new resiliency, she believed that she needed but to spread wings and fly. As for the wings, she could feel them bud beneath her shoulders. She took to her feet and ran lightly onward as she had done when a child, from pure ecstasy of spirits.

As she ran she stretched a wet and clinging hand to some spirit invisible, which seemed all at once to spring up and move beside her.

"Let us run and run till we are out of breath," she cried to it, laughing, as she had cried and laughed in childhood. The earth felt light and alive beneath her feet. They no sooner touched it than they rebounded into the air. She seemed no longer subject to the laws of gravity. The invisible hand of her invisible comrade imparted a magical buoyancy.

So she ran till she came up breathless and still laughing before a tall white gate. All gates in all gardens should be white. All gates in all gardens should be tall and of a delicate tracery and painted white. Seen from a distance at the end of dark vistas of shade, they suggest a veil of lace, half concealing, half revealing mysteries. Their whiteness, virginal, immaculate, suggests that no hand before has opened them, entices to untrod paths of purest loveliness, auroral dews, fairy dancing-places, perfumed violet beds, richly purple and unpressed, rising phoenix-like from year to year upon the fragrant ashes of their dead. Yes! Garden gates should be always white, she reflected, brought up suddenly before this one. And like this one should they have tall stone pillars, overlaid with moss and lichen, and should be surmounted by stone balls likewise flecked upon their globeing curves with golden lichen. Through the lace-like tracerries she could see, the mystery enhanced by obscurity, a path winding down into a wood, moss-carpeted and dark and cool. At the feet of grey old trees, filmed to the knees by mosses, tufts of snowdrops sprang. Their heads were nodding with baby wisdoms.

With a sudden longing she stretched her hands to them. If she might but pluck a handful of these first-born of the year! She had never before seen snowdrops growing wild. They seemed far sweeter and more guileless than the snowdrops of cultivation.

But she was earlier than the gardeners and the gates were locked. The white veil, which from a distance had seemed so ethereal, was a veil of iron, rigid and immovable. So she stood looking and longing, looking and longing, and

sometimes impatiently shaking the gate. Till presently, with an unsatisfied sigh, she turned away.

She came upon the shore. The sea was lashing it in ungovernable fury, lashing also rocks which stood in it like sullen creatures impassively taking their chastisement of stinging spume and foam-whips. Gulls spread wings and wheeled in short, sharp curves above them, uttering hoarse cries, as though distressed by the plight of friendly strongholds, which in times of peace had served them for club and parliament.

She did not watch long. Outside the shelter of the trees, the rain beat down upon her and the winds blew until she was breathless and blinded and could scarcely keep her feet. She retraced her way to the house.

Fatigue now succeeded upon exhilaration. She no longer ran but walked with heavy feet. Nature and the new air had got into her mind, cleansing and bracing it. But her body was still city-built. Its tissues had not been compounded of sun and air and fresh, invigorating breezes. They had still to be renewed. After the lusty buffeting of winds she felt limp and inelastic, as she might have done after a romp with tom-boy children.

Her drenched skirts frou-frou-ed about her with a soaked swish. At each step her shoes gave a little anguished shriek. Her hair, loosed from its knot by impudent wind-gusts, straggled in dripping strands across her face. As she went, with her chilled fingers she re-twisted it into a knot. Near the house she stooped and wrung out her petticoats, from which a fringe of water dropped.

She stood under cover of the last tree and swept the open space with abashed glances. She was in no plight to be seen.

The stable-clock had struck seven. The servants would be down. Then she gathered her dress in a hand and ran quickly out of cover, down the gravelled path, up a little flight of marble steps and out upon the terrace skirting the house. There was nobody to be seen, although the unshuttered windows told their tale. She found that by which she had made her exit. To her disappointment it was fastened. She shook it sharply. It resisted firmly. A glance through



## THE STORM.

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the panes showed her a pool of wet upon the polished oak within. The window had evidently blown open after she had left it and the rain had swept in. Someone had found it open and had fastened it.

With a mortified sense that she could not now escape discovery she went on in the direction of the door. A moment later she felt like one who walks unawares into a lion's den. For, as she reached the porch, the door opened and Sir Nigel appeared. He was dressed in a suit of oilskins. A cap was pulled over his brows.

After an instant of surprise at coming upon her, he bade her a quiet "Good morning." He held the door for her to pass.

His impersonal air asked no questions. It accepted the situation as though it were a matter of course that she should be slinking drenched into the house like one who had slept in the woods. She realised herself as a ridiculous figure, with the rain trickling down her face and her hair plastered wet on her cheeks. But she felt a word of explanation was required.

"I am ashamed to be seen," she said. "But I have lived so long in London that I could not resist the temptation of going out into the storm."

His eyes rested on her for a moment, then he withdrew them to spare her the chagrin of being observed.

"I too am going out," he answered, looking before him. "I am told the wind has played havoc with my trees."

He opened the door more widely for her to pass. She slipped quickly through. She heard it close sharply as she stole upstairs.

She reached her room without a second witness of her dishevelment. But as she closed the door, she wished cordially that its one spectator had been any other than the master of the house.

"Such a Meg Merriless as I look!" she reflected, meeting her image in the glass.

Beside the neat and sober nurse which was her ideal of herself, she appeared, indeed, disordered. Of the scrupulous trimness which was her habit there was no trace. Yet, though not strictly beautiful, she was one of those persons

with the happy gift of picturesqueness. Many a strictly beautiful woman ceases to be beautiful in proportion as her hair or her dress is in disarray. The picturesque woman, on the contrary, gains by disarray. Disturb her conventional coiffure and she becomes a nymph—Næera of the tangled hair—one of Father Neptune's naiads. In a helmet she is Joan of Arc; with a babe in her arms a Madonna.

Camilla, in her cap and strings, presented the ideal nurse, calm, compassionate, controlled.

This morning, with her wet, disordered locks, a rich colour buffeted into her cheeks, her drenched, closely-clinging garments revealing her fine form, she was Diana, a Diana ill-treated by her elements, but eminently picturesque.

She, however, perceived no sylvan goddess in her glass. She saw merely a drenched and sadly dishevelled woman. Mortified, she broke up the caked cinders round the little heart of fire in the grate, and, coaxing a blaze, proceeded to dry her wet locks.

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## CHAPTER XII.

## CICERO.

Women who neglect certain properties used to be stoned. For that matter they are still, but the stones come from Bond Street.

SHE went down to breakfast once again the composed, trim nurse.

"You look tired," Miss Hanson said. "I hear the old lady gave you a bad day yesterday."

"I have been out," she answered. "It is always tiring to walk in a high wind."

"I had a taste of her ladyship's tantrums in the night. And I too have been out—to early celebration. Do you never go?"

"Sometimes."

"I go regularly twice a week. I make a point of never missing. It is a great comfort. Heigho!" She looked over the table. "I'm perfectly famishing."

Nevertheless, she seemed in spirits as she poured coffee.

She re-read an opened letter beside her plate.

"I have a bit of news," she said, with glancing eyes. "Mrs. Brattleton writes. She and I are great friends. As I told you, she is *such* a nice woman. She asks me to take you there to tea on one of her Tuesdays. She gives an At Home every second Tuesday. Such a crush of people! She is very popular. She has music and de foie gras sandwiches. Everything is most enjoyable."

Camilla expressed her thanks. She would be pleased to go some time, she said.

"But that isn't the news," Miss Hanson went on. "She tells me Lord Boisragon—it's pronounced Borragon, although it's spelt like a French word—the new Lord Boisragon and his son have come to live at the Castle. You haven't seen the Castle. It's a fine old place, about two miles from here. It had been empty for some time. Their coming has caused quite an excitement. Everybody has been most eager to know whether the new man would settle and live here as the old one did. They were afraid he might prefer to live in town."

"Who are the members of the family?" Camilla asked, although she was unable to feel so keen an interest as it appeared she should have done.

"Only Lord Boisragon and his son. Lord Boisragon himself is a widower, about fifty and rather interesting, they say. Arthur Colville, the son (he is not Honourable, you know, because his father was only Mr. when he was born)—he is about twenty-three—and handsome."

"It sounds romantic."

"Doesn't it? It will be delightfully exciting to see what happens. There'll be no end of setting of caps. Lord Boisragon didn't at all expect to come in for the title. He was quite a distant cousin. But several relatives died. Some people say he is rich. But nobody knows for certain whether or not he made money abroad. The estate is heavily mortgaged. But anyhow they are two exceptional eligibles—father as well as son. Being a widower and only fifty, and not at all old for his age, he is likely, of course, to marry again."

"What women are there here? Is there any society?"

"There are always women everywhere," Miss Hanson said decisively, "and Camelcarbis is no exception. There are Lord and Lady Pendaubyn and their three daughters, one of them quite nice looking. They live only six or seven miles from the Castle. And what are six or seven miles when you have plenty of horses as well as daughters?"

Camilla, being put to it, could give no other answer than "Nothing, of course."

"Then there's Mr. Hugh Treherne," the other went on eagerly. "He is a widower with one daughter, a fresh-faced,



pretty girl. How would it be if Arthur Colville were to marry Miss Gwendolen Treherne and if Lord Boisragon were to marry the eldest Pendaubyn girl although she is not the nice looking one?"

"It would be a very neat arrangement," Camilla said smiling. "But things don't always happen so conveniently."

"Then there's the Bishop," Miss Hanson resumed, knitting her brows. "It's true he lives nearly fifteen miles away. But as they have four daughters, Mrs. Maull would be sure to manage somehow or other to bring them over to functions. I suppose the two Brattleton girls, though Rose is pretty and plays the violin, are out of the question. Still men do marry out of their set if they happen to fall in love. Don't they?"

"Sometimes they do," Camilla agreed. She was amused to see her colleague so eager about it.

Two little vertical lines appeared in her forehead. Her prominent eyes fairly sparkled as she enumerated the eligibles of the neighbourhood. Had they been sons and daughters of her own she could scarcely have shown more interest in their matings.

"I like living where there's an aristocracy," she said. "What they say and do and wear and how they look makes a perpetual interest. It's like a novel or a play being acted all the time by real people. Of course, they're sometimes dull and stupid, and never do anything interesting all their lives. But they have opportunities and the best of everything if they choose to use them. They have not to drudge for their living, nor to consider ways and means. And so they can make their lives like stories, to interest and amuse people whose lives are busy and humdrum."

Camilla was impressed. "I never considered it from that standpoint," she said.

"I did not," the other answered, "until at one of the dinners Sir Nigel gives to his tenants twice a year, when the farmers and their womenkind were going over the house and grounds and admiring the pictures and things. All their talk was about the Harland family. One very old man remembered somebody in a portrait. And he told the others what he was like. 'Sooch a 'andsome gallant!' he called

him. He said 'all t' leddies, aye an soom o' t' gells as wasn't leddies,' he added, 'wur fit to lay themselves under his feet.' And one told stories of some other. Many of them had been groom, or maid, or nurse to members of the family. All their talk was of the Harlands or the other County families. You could tell that their sayings and doings had made conversation and interest for the villagers all their lives. And see how eagerly middle-class people read society papers, and how keen they are about the Court, and about aristocrats they have never even seen, nor are likely to see."

Camilla recalled crowds she had seen round London churches, when a fashionable wedding had been taking place, women without hat or bonnet struggling along, with staring babies in their arms, to catch a glimpse of bride or groom; well-dressed women of the professional and lower middle-classes, filling the building in eager excitement to witness the nuptials of persons who were strangers to them. Crowds, too, patient and well-behaved, surrounding the doorways of houses, where fashionable functions were in progress, admiring the jewels and gowns, and seeming to participate, without envy or grudging, in luxuries and pleasures denied to themselves.

"Perhaps that is the reason," she suggested, "that class is tolerated. Life by means of it is made more interesting, light and shade added by the inequalities. If all lived at the same level, it would be monotonous and colourless. Yet it seems hard upon those who have no part in the more pleasant living."

"I don't know," Miss Hanson said. "They prefer the things they are accustomed to. And, after all, the spectators enjoy a play as much as, perhaps more than, the actors do."

Camilla laughed.

"Kings and Queens and persons of rank would be rather astonished to see themselves in the light merely of actors in a perpetual play for the amusement of lesser people. In that case it would be their duty to make the play pretty and interesting, perhaps also to make it serve as a lesson in morals as well as in manners."

Miss Hanson caught only the surface of the reflection.

"Ah! I won't answer for the morals," she said, shaking a serious head. "If what one hears and reads is true, the higher classes have little to boast about on that score. Now Lord Boisragon, for instance—you won't, of course, repeat this—but people are asking who his son's mother was. Nothing is known about his marriage, who or when or where he married. It isn't even known for certain that he is a widower. He has been for twenty years or more abroad, in Australia or Africa or some of those places where there are cattle ranches. And it is said he may possibly have married a black woman."

"Is the son very dark, then?"

"Oh, not at all. Mrs. Brattleton says his complexion is exceptionally fair, although his eyes are brown. Still when men settle in hot countries they do often marry black women. And they say Lord Boisragon never intended to return to England. He did not expect to succeed to the title, you see, there were so many between him and the man who had it. And he'd been rather wild before he left England, and his family wasn't very cordial to him. So, of course, he may have done anything."

Breakfast over, she consulted her watch. The anticipated stir in the neighbourhood had put her into spirits. Camilla warmed to her in her new cordiality and in the inconsequent flow of her shrewd yet naive confidences.

"There are just ten minutes to spare before you need go on duty," she said now. "Do come with me to my room. I have something to show you."

As they went, the elderly woman who had received Camilla on the evening of her arrival, appeared at the end of a corridor.

"You know Mrs. Merritt, the housekeeper," Miss Hanson said. "She's a lady housekeeper, not an ordinary working one. She really was a lady, although she's a widow now. Her husband was a Dean," she added impressively.

She quickened her steps and called:

"Mrs. Merritt, Mrs. Merritt, do come upstairs with us. I'm going to show Cicero to Miss Braeburn."

Mrs. Merritt turned and came to meet them.

She and Camilla bade one another "Good morning!" She was a tall, dark-eyed woman, with a pleasant face and a fresh colour.

"How do you think you will like Pentagel?" she questioned, as the trio proceeded together along the corridor. Her glances lingered upon Camilla as they had done on the evening of her arrival.

"I think I shall like it extremely," Camilla said. "It is a beautiful house, and the grounds are perfect. The mixture of wild seashore and lovely cultivated gardens is so novel."

"Yes, it is unique," Mrs. Merritt agreed. She added:

"Your patient is a little—difficult."

"Perhaps."

"Sir Nigel is aware of it," the housekeeper said. "You will meet with every consideration."

Nurse Hanson came to a stand before a door. She turned and addressed Camilla rather wistfully.

"You *are* fond of animals?" she appealed. She held the handle of the door jealously, almost as though she would exclude an inappreciative visitor.

Camilla assented cordially.

The other beamed again. "I think you'll find him sweet," she said.

Her room had a different aspect from Camilla's. It was above the morning-room, and looked upon the same broad, shaded lawns. It was low and long, with dark oak panelings. Its embrasured windows were jewelled with medallions of stained glass. Heraldic rampant beasts, similar to those upon the upholstering of Camilla's room, were to be seen here also, but here the draperies were of a rich blue. In the old-world room the nurse had made a little nest of up-to-date appurtenances. This, doubtless, supplied a need of her nature, but it presented a flaring incongruity. Photographs framed in plush and lacquer stood with cheap and jaunty airs upon a carved oak chest, gloomy with honourable years and traditions, such a chest as the bride in the song might have chosen for her hiding-place. Little mats and crochet squares were spread upon the polished surface as though to make worthier shrines for portraits of young men in blazers, girls in party frocks or modern, portly



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matrons in bonnets and dolmans. Bits of cheap bric-a-brac, Birmingham pottery and imitation lustre-ware, a chain of plush monkeys, pocket editions in gaudy colours, and six-penny busts of poets and philosophers had been distributed with an eye to making them go as far as they would, and extending to its furthest limits the sorry oasis in the great room.

"You see I make my room homelike," Miss Hanson said, smiling and indicating her treasures. "I advise you to do the same if you have made any interesting collections. It's so cheerful to be surrounded by one's own friends and belongings."

Camilla took up a photograph and inquired about it with becoming interest, while Mrs. Merritt, with shut lips and eloquent looks, glanced out from the oasis wherein she stood, down the long dignified room, upon which this eruption of meretricious adornment showed like a nettle-rash upon a fine face.

"That photograph?" Miss Hanson said. "Oh, that was our house and grounds at Clapham. That was when we were well off. In those days I never thought I should come to be working for my living. Papa was a successful stock-broker, and we kept our carriage, till he lost nearly everything in a big speculation. But he only just missed, 'by the skin of his teeth,' he used to tell us, being a sort of millionaire. So we girls had to turn out and do the best we could for ourselves. Though we had all been brought up to be ladies. But come and see Cicero."

She moved to a species of Chinese pagoda in miniature, to which, standing on a little table near the fire, Camilla's attention had already been drawn by sounds of life and movement, sudden little rapid rushes, the vibratory jar of sharp teeth against wire.

The pagoda, which served its occupant for bed and living-room, was provided with a wire run, which served him for pleasure-ground. In this, as they approached, could be seen the long and tumid body of a white rat. Its sharply-pointed head was raised and turned in their direction. One eye, like a spot of blood with a spark of light behind it, fastened upon them luridly. Between the meshes of the run

a pink tail, coarse-fleshed and thick, obtruded. A sickening smell surrounded the pagoda.

"You darling," the mistress of this treasure cried. She ran forward in an impatience of affection. She opened a small door and took the creature in a hand. Her face grew soft and emotional.

"Cicero! Little Cicero," she cried. "You see, he knows his name as well as we know ours," she assured Camilla. "Would you like to hold him for a minute? He is perfectly gentle."

She held the creature, which remained passive in her two hands, to Camilla. Its blood-red eye glinted furtively upon her. Its tail stiffened. Its mistress seemed relieved when Camilla drew back. It was as though she were reluctant to part with it even for a minute.

"Clever old boy! And was lady afraid of him?" she cried caressingly. She lifted it to her face; she kissed it and fondled it against her cheek and neck. "Did he love his missis, then? Didn't he want to leave her and to go to strangers? Missis will give him a nice treat presently—a big bit of hard-boiled egg."

Her voice thrilled. There was a glow in her eyes.

"Are you really fond of it?" Camilla asked.

"Fond of him!" she repeated in astonishment. "Fond of Cicero. I should think I am. I love him better than anything in the world. See now, how he loves me."

She set the creature loose upon her shoulder. It wound its swollen body round her throat, pressing itself caressingly against her. It caught a strand of her hair between its teeth and gently pulled it. It went feeling with its sharply-pointed snout along her chin, and rested it finally against her lips.

Camilla turned away quickly. "I must go," she said. "It must be nine o'clock."

Then feeling called upon to say a word in praise of her colleague's pet, she added: "It does seem intelligent and fond of you. I did not know such creatures had so much affection."

She quitted the room, Mrs. Merritt going with her. Outside she stopped, and drew her handkerchief across her lips.

"It was rather horrible," she said, with a sickened look.

Mrs. Merritt smiled quietly. She had seen a good deal of life and was less easily moved.

"I should not like to kiss the thing myself," she said, "nor to let it come near me. But she is really devoted to it. It was ill once and she sat up several nights and nursed it and fed it with the greatest care. She cried bitterly when she thought it might die."

She added as they went: "Women must have somebody or something to care for. I suppose nature meant them to have babies to be fond of."

"There is work to interest one," Camilla urged. "And there are other people's babies and one's friends."

Mrs. Merritt slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"Tastes differ," she said. "And, perhaps, even a greater need than to be fond of somebody is to receive affection. Some women's lives are very empty."

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The patient was unusually tractable that morning. She protested less against the pains of dressing. She suffered herself to be put into the amber and black gown without even looking at another. She wore the jewels of the previous day—according to Benson, a rare concession.

When she consented to wear the same dress on two consecutive days (for despite her limited powers she was acutely sensible on this point) she was generally exacting in the matter of her jewels.

Notwithstanding her passiveness, her eyes abated no whit of their antagonism. The same lance-points of enmity gleamed in them. Camilla thought they gleamed, perhaps, less spitefully on Benson than upon herself.

Sir Nigel came in in spirits. His encounter with the elements had not affected him. He seemed overflowing with energy.

He approached the invalid with a slightly apologetic smile. His eyes appeared to ask did she remember his anger of the day before. Apparently she had forgotten it. She lay impassive, her face without expression. She showed no interest in the letters or journals he brought. To his an-

nouncement of names she merely stared before her as though she had not heard.

He discovered that she was not listening. He sat silent. Still she showed no sign. It was evident that this morning she was wholly indifferent as to whether he read or whether he was silent.

He rose to go. Before doing so, he stooped and said in a raised voice:

"You remember old Boisragon?"

She appeared not to have heard.

"You remember he died six months ago. I am going this afternoon to call upon the new man."

She betrayed no interest either in him or in his prospective visit.

"The new man is Talbot Colville," he added, on the point of leaving. "You must have heard of Talbot Colville."

Camilla, at the other end of the room, was startled by his sudden exclamation: "Good Heavens!"

Then: "Nurse," he called peremptorily, "come at once, please."

She and Benson, who had just entered, ran quickly to the couch. The invalid had started forward and sat staring wildly. Her jaw had fallen. She was babbling broken incoherences. Her eyes seemed to strain as though in an effort to dispel opacities clouding them and her consciousness.

Camilla put firm arms about her and gently forced the shrunken body back upon its pillows. She stared dully into the nurse's face. She clutched at her arms. She seemed to have lost herself, and to be grappling by means of sight and touch for her identity.

"It must have been a seizure of some sort," Sir Nigel said.

A groom was despatched post-haste for the doctor.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE NEW LORD BOISRAGON.

The force of character is cumulative. All the foregone days of virtue work their health into this.

THE doctor, finding nothing amiss, Sir Nigel rode over in the afternoon to pay his respects to the new Lord Boisragon.

He had known him years before as Talbot Colville. Indeed the families were distantly related. He remembered him, a shy and secretive young man, tall and slim, with a pale face and gentle manners, attractive to women, but unpopular with men owing to his shyness and secretiveness. One had never known what he was thinking, or what he might be doing. His air of abstraction gave an impression that his interests and thoughts were far away from the person in whose company he was.

Things had changed since then, Sir Nigel reflected. As he rode he looked before him with moody eyes. He wondered whether Talbot had been luckier than he.

At all events, he had his son.

A spasm crossed his face. Round him, so far as he could see—and farther—the land was his. Green upland, fertile field, stream and farm and homestead were his own, and had belonged to his fathers and his forbears for nearly a dozen centuries. He loved every rood of it. He knew every tree and hedge and lane. The brambles in the hedges, where as a boy he had picked blackberries, the trees he had climbed for nests, the stream he had fished and

still fished, were like the faces of old friends. And like faces they seemed to reproach him. At his death they would pass into the hands of strangers. They would become dependants, uncared for and unprized beyond their money value.

He shook off his mood. Of what use to indulge it. He was like a man caught in a trap. He had long since ceased to hope for escape.

Boisragon Castle stood on the southern slope of the only mountain in the neighbourhood. It was of recent construction, although turreted and battlemented after the fashion of the original mediæval building, which a century earlier had been burned to the ground. It was an imposing and picturesque pile, flanked and fringed by magnificent old trees. Nobody knew when the Boisragons had come into existence. Their origin was lost in the ages. It was said that a Knight of Boisragon had sat at King Arthur's table, and had done redoubtable deeds. The tradition was honoured by naming the eldest son of each succeeding generation Arthur. The second son had Arthur also for a second name, in order that should his elder die without issue, an Arthur Lord Boisragon should still be in existence. Oddly enough, although the present man had never dreamt of succeeding, and was himself named Talbot, his son had been christened "Arthur."

As a turn in the road brought the Castle into view, the flying flag attracted Sir Nigel's eye. Boisragons had lived and died, but throughout a succession, dating back to mythical days, a Boisragon was still in residence. He urged his horse to a gallop, and was soon at the gate.

His Lordship was in. He followed the one man-servant of the establishment through a succession of dull and threadbare rooms to the library. Odours, musty and dusty and leathery, reigned. Ancient volumes, moth-eaten and with faded, weary faces, which seemed to implore an honourable *Nunc Dimitis*, lined the walls from floor to ceiling. In the old days there had been Boisragons, scholars and writers.

The room was now empty, but a trio of chairs and a table, littered with modern books and papers grouped about a cheerful fire, bespoke recent occupation.



## THE NEW LORD BOISRAGON. 85

Sir Nigel wondered, as he took one of the chairs, whether Colville had brought money to replenish the needy family coffers. He doubted it. The house had numbered many a spendthrift, but never a financier. From time to time its fortunes had been wrested from the jaws of bankruptcy by marriage with an heiress. But the haughty family tradition had been such that all but heiresses of blue blood had been unconditionally rejected, and the fortunes of the heiress-wives had, therefore, fallen sadly short of fortunes made in beer or cotton.

A minute later host and visitor were shaking hands.

"I shouldn't have known you," Sir Nigel said.

"You've scarcely changed," Lord Boisragon commented. They spoke in the same breath.

"Only you've gone a bit grey," his Lordship added.

"It's over twenty years," Sir Nigel said.

"Nearly twenty-three," said Boisragon.

With large, white hands he drew forward a chair for his guest. He seated himself near. The tall, slim youngster had put on flesh, had grown, indeed, notably and inconveniently stout. He was still pale, despite his rough outdoor existence. His eyes had faded, but they had the same abstracted look Sir Nigel remembered. He wore that expression of heavy melancholy which is sometimes to be seen in very stout men. He let himself sink wearily into his chair, and folded his large hands.

Sir Nigel, fresh skinned and spare, sat bolt upright, energy and fire in eye and limb.

"Well, I'm glad to have you for a neighbour," he said. "The old Lord and I were good friends, but the two last men I had not met till they succeeded. And they followed one another so rapidly, I hadn't time to know either."

"I never expected it, of course," the other answered. He sighed. "I can't say I particularly wanted it. I was contented enough as I was. But there was Arthur to be thought of."

"You liked the Antipodes," Sir Nigel said. "You must have seen things worth seeing—out there so long."

"Oh, I don't know," the other answered, looking past him with his heavy, abstracted gaze. "Life's much the same

everywhere. If you don't find it what you've been used to, you set about making it as much like as possible."

"Did you go in for sport? There would be game of a sort where you were, I suppose. If I remember you didn't care much for sport though in the old days."

"Never cared for it a rap," Boisragon said. He laughed hollowly. "Now I'm scarcely the physique. *You've* kept thin."

Sir Nigel laughed too.

"I give myself no time to put on flesh," he said. "You remember I was always active."

"I know." The other sent him a little glance of envy. "You always out-walked the rest of us."

"I'm never happier than with a gun," Sir Nigel said, his blue eyes gleaming. "If you don't care to, no doubt your boy will like to join me. What age is he, by the way?"

Boisragon's heavy eyeballs flickered. They emitted a furtive gleam, swifter and more searching than had seemed possible to them. Then they reverted to their heavy, far-away stare.

"He is just into his twenties," he said tonelessly.

A gleam of humour lighted Sir Nigel's face.

"Then you married soon," he said. "You went out a rabid woman-scorner, I remember."

"Did I?" the other said. He seemed embarrassed. "Youngsters talk a deal of damned nonsense," he added with a sudden savagery.

He changed the subject.

"You have no children, I hear."

"None."

Boisragon began again to speak. He checked himself, rose, moved heavily to the bell and rang it.

"You must see Arthur," he said with a little eagerness. In the interval before the answering of the bell:

"Lady Harland is an invalid, they tell me."

"She's been an invalid for fifteen years," Sir Nigel stated with an imperturbable face.

"Oh, Lord!" his host exclaimed, with a slight, sympathetic start. "Hard lines on you, Harland."

"I've grown used to it," Harland returned.



## THE NEW LORD BOISRAGON. 87

Arthur Colville came in presently. He reminded Sir Nigel of what his father had been at his age. He was of the same slim build, he had the same pallor, the same neutral coloured hair, a lock of which fell persistently over his brows, causing him to toss his head as persistently in order to restore it to its place—precisely as his father had done. Unlike his father, he had easy manners and betrayed neither shyness nor abstraction. His eyes were dark and wide apart, giving him a look of careless candour. His fair skin was pale as though bleached by suns.

"A nice youngster," Sir Nigel decided, "or he will be when he has seen more of civilisation."

He had plainly been spoilt. He showed the assurance and imperiousness seen in young persons accustomed to associate with inferiors. His father followed his every movement with worshipping eyes. He deferred to his opinion. He gave place when, having begun to speak, the youth interrupted and finished his sentence for him or started upon one of his own.

"I don't care much for the life here," he answered rather superciliously to Sir Nigel's question. "I suppose I shall get used to it. But the house wants a lot of money spending on it—to make it decent. I tell the Guv. he ought to have electric light and motor cars."

Lord Boisragon laughed.

"Hear him," he cried. "He's soon got bitten by civilisation. A month in Brisbane, the voyage with a batch of young officers drafted home, two months in London—and he's lost all he learned in the wilds. We were cattle ranching in Queensland, you know."

"Successfully, I hope."

Lord Boisragon shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Enough to live on," he returned, "and to send the boy to college in Brisbane."

"Oh, he did very well, Sir," the boy said petulantly. "Guv. always goes misery."

But he smiled a fond disarming smile at his father as he spoke. It was plain they were devoted to one another.

Sir Nigel watching them perceived it.

He rose soon to go.

"You must come over and bring your gun," he told young Colville. "The season is done, but birds were plentiful, and I did not have my usual muster this year for the shoots. There are still some superfluous old birds."

"Thanks awfully," Arthur said, his dark eyes lighting. "The shooting here was let, and they seem to have simply massacred."

"Your keepers should not have allowed it," Sir Nigel said sharply. "From what I saw and heard I feared something of the kind."

"Things have been going to rack and ruin," Boisragon assented languidly. "There's been no money. And I believe the truth is, the few keepers there are, are poachers themselves or wink at the poachers."

"Well they'll have to go then," Arthur said masterfully. "Father's too easy with men. He was at home. He thinks it's too much trouble to keep them up to the mark. But I'm going to see to things here, and I'll kick out the old gang and get in a new if they try on any of their games."

His father laughed. "New brooms!" he quoted. "But you're like your father. After the first spurt you let things go."

Arthur flung out of the room with a sudden sulkiness.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said, "I'm going for Dane. I'll walk home with Sir Nigel."

"Sir Nigel may not want to be bothered with a young jackanapes like you," his father called after him, at the same time melting into a smile, which plainly affirmed that the visitor would not be likely to decline such company.

"He's a bit spoilt," he added. "He was all I had. I suppose I've given him his head too much. I was bothered about his manners before we reached England. But I find youngsters here are more lax than they would have been allowed to be in our day."

He rang the bell.

"It's early for tea. I find men nowadays drink tea here like women. Will you take whiskey and seltzer or wine?"

Sir Nigel would take nothing.

"Then I must drink alone," Boisragon said.

He poured himself a stiff mixture from the tray the ser-



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vant brought. "Out there, with long hard days in the air, one had to drink pretty hard. One gets into habits."

"What are you going to do with the youngster?" Sir Nigel asked.

"Marry him to money." The answer was decisive. "There is nothing else to be done. I've made something, of course, more than might have been expected. But this place wants decent keeping up, as he said. What girls are there here?"

"No very great heiresses," Sir Nigel answered smiling. "Gwendolen Treherne will have, I suppose, about fifty-thousand pounds, and, no doubt, Pendaubyn will give his girls ten or fifteen thousand pounds apiece."

The other scoffed. "A fleabite! It wants at least ten thousand a year to keep up this place properly. It's a sort of sieve for running away with money."

"Then you'll have to look sharply after him," Sir Nigel insisted, laughing. "There's no such fortune here. And there are one or two girls pretty enough to persuade him to love in a cottage."

"Oh, he knows what's expected of him."

"You allow nothing for sentiment?"

"Sentiment! Rubbish! After a month one woman is the same as any other, plain or handsome, white or black. Where there is property and a title a wife is a necessity. Otherwise men are fools to be bothered with 'em." After a pause, during which his brows met frowning: "Ah, I remember," he broke out. "You were romantic in the old days. All fire! Wrote poetry to their eyebrows and spelled them with a big 'W.'"

"I won't answer for so much," Sir Nigel said. "But we've all been youngsters. Before that, no doubt, I whipped tops."

Arthur now returned, a great Dane frisking and leaping about him, brushing and endangering the stability of chairs and tables by its clumsy gambollings.

"I'll walk with you, Sir, if I may," he said, with an engaging young smile, to Sir Nigel.

"I shall like a walk," Sir Nigel answered, returning his smile with one as engaging and almost as young. "But I

rode. Can you send over my hack? Or will you ride back with me?"

Arthur flushed and fidgetted. His face took on an injured look.

"I have no mount," he said at last. "There is only one in the stables, and I lamed her yesterday."

"I have three or four eating off their heads," Sir Nigel told him. "You are welcome to one as often as you please."

The youth's eyes glistened. To ride had become as necessary to him as to eat.

"It's awfully kind of you," he said with a thrill in his voice.

Lord Boisragon turned a jealous face.

"Don't spoil the boy, Harland," he insisted bluntly, "though I know what the lack of horses means to him."

They went out together, the great Dane jostling and nearly overturning them in joy at the prospect of a jaunt.

"Don't you smoke?" the young man said, when Sir Nigel shook his head at the cigarette case he proffered.

"When I feel disposed."

"I never feel indisposed," Arthur retorted, as he lighted one for himself.

"That means you never feel disposed," Sir Nigel said. "You should economise your pleasures. They've got to last you your lifetime. And you'll need them before you have finished."

Arthur laughed.

"I need them now," he said.

He glanced sidelong at the strong fine profile of the elder man, the delicate, dominant nose, the keen blue eye, the clear, vigorous complexion. Beside it his own looked languid and exotic. Sir Nigel's face showed that combination of asceticism and sensuousness which has made the greatest and most interesting men, the asceticism preserving vigour and sensibility, the sensuousness preventing the asceticism from hardening into mere toughness and impassibility. Arthur had neither the philosophy nor the experience to understand this, but he knew himself to be in the presence of an exceptional man, one who compelled his interest and admiration.



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Moved to sudden confidence he said, "Did you know my mother, Sir? Can you tell me anything about her? The Guv. will never speak of her."

"I did not know her. Your father married abroad. He left us, a bachelor."

"Oh, no," Arthur insisted, "you are mistaken. He married an English woman. She went out with him. I must have been born soon after they arrived. I am in my twenty-third year, and he was in Queensland just over twenty-three years."

Sir Nigel had heard rumours. His face became impenetrable. He felt the young man's errant dark eyes upon him.

"You are better informed, you see, than I," he answered quietly. "Your father and I had drifted apart, our lives taking us different ways, for some time before he left England."

"But you must surely have heard about his marriage, and who my mother was?"

"No. It would be about the time my own father died, and I was fully occupied with my own affairs."

Arthur looked disappointed. "I hoped you would have been able to tell me. She died a few months after I was born. Father has an old daguerreotype of her, but I only once saw it—when I was quite a boy. Usually he tells me everything. But if I speak of her he shuts up close. I can't get a word out of him. I suppose he was very fond of her."

From what Boisragon had told him, an hour earlier, Sir Nigel was disposed to doubt it.

But: "Possibly," he said.

"Who can I ask?" Arthur appealed impetuously. "I want to know everything about her. It's natural I should want to know all about my mother. Father was here a good deal before he went abroad. I should think someone here must have known her. Tell me who I should ask?"

"You should not ask anybody. Presently you will find Boisragon will tell you all you wish to know."

Arthur made a gesture of dissent.

"At all events," Sir Nigel insisted, "you cannot question strangers about your mother."

"But there is no sort of mystery," the young man said, flying off at a tangent.

"Not the slightest. And you must not make one."

Arthur's impressionable face clouded.

"It's hard lines on a man," he said sulkily, "not to know anything of his own mother."

The talk drifted to other topics. Arrived at the house: "Come in and drink a cup of tea with me," Sir Nigel invited him.

Arthur wavered.

"I should like to. But really I ought not. I promised father to go through some plans with him and the agent at five. But"—he flung aside his cigarette (the third he had smoked during the walk).

"Come some other time, then," Sir Nigel said, ignoring the ultimate decision of his indecision. "Come any time you like. I shall be pleased to see you. And you're young enough," he added smiling, "not to be offended if I should tell you I was busy."

"Oh, I shouldn't be offended," Arthur said. But his chin tilted in a sensitive, girlish fashion, as though it hurt his self-esteem to suppose he might at any time be unwelcome.

Sir Nigel noted it.

"Boisragon has spoilt him," he reflected.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE ESCRITAIRE.

The ornament of a house is the friends who frequent it.

CAMILLA from a window of her room which fronted the drive saw the two take leave of one another at the door. She guessed that the slim young man was Arthur Colville.

The invalid, having dropped into a heavy dose, she had left her alone while she ran up to her room for her writing-case. She owed some letters, and decided that there would be just time to write them before tea would be brought.

The writing-case was in her trunk. She had mislaid her keys. It took her some minutes to find them. She had then to descend to the bottom of the trunk for a packet of black-edged paper, one of her letters being a letter of condolence.

She was concerned to discover by the chiming of the clock in the corridor as she reached the door of Lady Harland's room that she had been absent nearly ten minutes. The patient had, however, appeared to be so soundly asleep that she did not suppose she would have been missed.

Entering she stood confounded. A glance showed her the couch beside the fire vacant. Another glance showed her the invalid crouched on hands and knees dragging herself in her rich fineries painfully along the floor. As she moved she broke into sharp little groans, which she immediately suppressed, glancing with furtive frightened airs about her as though she feared discovery. Then she would shuffle on again with renewed haste.

Camilla stood in amazement. She had previously regarded her as being wholly incapable of sustained movement, a helpless log chained to her couch. As she watched, the poor groaning woman arrived before a handsome Empire escritoire which stood at the end of the room with two fine lacquered candelabra upon it. She raised herself into a sitting posture and stretched up her shaking powerless hands to it. She moaned and appeared to entreat its two closed doors to give up something that she wanted. She beat her hands together. She wrung them above her head. She uttered sharp imperative cries.

Camilla went toward her. She caught the sound of steps and turned her head. Seeing the nurse her eyes filled with evil anger. She darted her hands malevolently at her, as though she had it in her mind to strike her. She mumbled fiercely. Then suddenly a quiet cunning replaced her menacings. She slipped to the floor and lay there with her accustomed apathy. Her eyes still gleamed maliciously.

Camilla was young and strong. Stooping she lifted the wasted body in her arms and carried it back to the couch. The invalid made no resistance. She moaned feebly and stared about her with airs of bewilderment. But as Camilla carried her she dug the nails of one hand sharply and with no little force into her bearer's arm. Presently, when Camilla rolled back her sleeve to find the extent of an injury which was occasioning her a good deal of smarting, she found three flaming crescents, from one of which blood had been drawn.

Benson coming in Camilla related the occurrence, and expressed her surprise.

"I had not thought she could move from the couch," she said.

Benson glanced over to where her mistress now lay motionless. "Lord knows what she can't do," she retorted. "She ought never to be left for a moment."

"I was wrong, of course," Camilla said. "Yet she seemed to be so soundly asleep. I shall not leave her again. But as she can move there should certainly be a fire-guard."

She glanced with a little appalled sense at the open fire. She reflected upon the invalid's mental deficiencies.

"There's no call for that," Benson returned, with grim

assurance. "She's a great deal too clever ever to hurt herself."

"She seemed to wish for something in the escritaire."

"Very likely she does. Maybe there's letters and things of hers in it. It used to be in her boudoir in the old days, and she always wrote her letters at it and kept her things there. Haven't you noticed how often her eyes go to it? Once before I found her by it."

"But does she remember? One might suppose her mind to be a blank."

Benson shook her head.

"Lord knows what she knows," she said, "and what she doesn't know!"

Later she informed Camilla that the key of the escritaire had been lost for years. The lock was complicated and no key had been found to fit it.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later Lord Boisragon and Arthur drove over to return Sir Nigel's call.

Camilla met the shabby brake in the drive as she was setting out upon an afternoon walk. The younger man stared at her with undisguised admiration, the elder looked, then looked away in his abstracted fashion.

"We met such a beautiful girl in the drive, Sir Nigel," Arthur told his host eagerly. "She was dressed as a nurse. There was something quite topping about her. Could you introduce me?"

Sir Nigel shook his head.

"She is one of my wife's nurses."

"But I am sure she is a lady."

"Possibly," Sir Nigel answered. He turned to Lord Boisragon.

"How spick and span you keep things here," the latter said, with an envious inflection. "Even if I had the money I couldn't be bothered."

"Ashby—my agent—is a good man, and keeps a sharp look-out. And I've been used to it for so long."

Whilst the elder men with their chairs together talked, Arthur lounged about the room inspecting pictures, examining

the titles of books, or letting his wandering appreciative eyes stray through the windows into the beautiful grounds.

Approaching Sir Nigel's chair to admire a handsome bronze he started back. He looked nervously to the floor.

"I say, Sir," he broke out. "There's a dog under your chair. He made a dart for my calves."

Sir Nigel's face melted into a delighted smile. He put down a caressing hand and fondled a silken head, which at the touch of his hand protruded a nose from below his chair.

"Fan," he said with gentle chiding, "what a bad dog you are to show such manners. She won't hurt," he reassured young Colville, "she doesn't snap or she would have been banished long ago. She only thrusts her nose at you when you venture too near her master. It's the poor brute's way of showing devotion."

"Jealousy," Arthur suggested.

"Jealousy," Sir Nigel said. His face lighted softly, as though the dog's affection were a factor in his life.

Tea had been brought, and Sir Nigel was pouring it when further visitors were announced. As they came up the room his host observed in a whimsical aside to Lord Boisragon, "One of the heiresses!"

He introduced Mr. and Miss Treherne to his guests. Mr. Treherne was tall and spare, with stiff airs and staring eyes, eyes so expressionless and shiny as to suggest that they were made of glass. The impression was heightened by a curious mechanical way he had of moving them. He bowed with an air of self-importance to Lord Boisragon.

"We have just come from calling on you, Lord Boisragon," he said. "We are fortunate to find you here."

In point of fact he had expected to find them there, having been gratuitously informed by the old man-servant at the Castle whither his lordship and his son had gone.

Miss Treherne was a pretty girl with eyes large and noticeable like her father's, but though they also shone they did not stare. They were fringed with long dark lashes which made a charming contrast with her abundant fair and rather colourless hair. She was smartly dressed and a breeze had blown a pretty colour to her cheeks.

Arthur at once betrayed interest. Sir Nigel made him

carry her tea and his own to a cosy window corner, where the two were soon chatting and laughing as though they had known one another all their lives.

From time to time Mr. Treherne turned his head and fixed his staring eyes upon them. They seemed to put a question. After a half minute he would turn again and resume his conversation with the other men.

"I met you once, long ago, at the Bishop's at a dance," he told Boisragon. "Perhaps you don't remember. Lambert was our Bishop then, a genial old chap. We've got a countryman of our own now for Bishop. We've all grown older since those days."

"I remember you perfectly," his lordship said. "You were a tall stripling. I remember you drank too much champagne, and we put you under the pump in the courtyard after the ladies had gone to bed."

Mr. Treherne raised his brows. He smiled stiffly.

"I have no recollection of that," he said. He did not seem pleased to be reminded of it. "I think you must be mistaking me for someone else."

"Oh no," Boisragon insisted. He laughed loudly. He seemed to enjoy the other's discomfiture. "I remember it all as though it were yesterday. Harland was there too. No doubt he remembers it. We got a frightful wiggling from old Lambert in the morning. You took a bad chill. What pranks youngsters play!"

Mr. Treherne smiled again, faintly. He shook his head gently as though he were quite unconvinced, but was too civil to insist upon it. He changed the subject.

"You were in Queensland?" he said. After a few conventional questions and answers as to how the other had liked the life there, of what sort was the climate, and similar commonplaces:

"You married a Queensland lady, I am told," Treherne said suddenly, his staring eyes on his host's face.

It was Boisragon's turn to show discomfiture, although no more appeared than a slight uneasy movement in his chair.

"Your informant was wrong," he said, his white face becoming all at once a mask. "I married an Englishwoman."

Mr. Treherne was on the point of speaking, it may be of

following up the subject, when Miss Treherne, sitting at the window, suddenly sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Father!" she cried, "oh, Sir Nigel! Here are eight of the loveliest peacocks, and two of the sweetest little creatures with their mother. They seem to expect to be fed. Oh, you beauty!" she exclaimed enthusiastically to one which had flown up to the window-sill and was seen lowering and raising, lowering and raising its crested head, its long liquid eyes swimming with confident anticipation.

Sir Nigel rose. Smiling he took up a dish of cakes and carried it to the window. Fan slipped from her hiding-place beneath his chair and, following him, sprang upon a little ottoman beside the window. There she sat staring at her handsome rivals, barking jealously when she could no longer contain her envious emotions. She appeared to realise and resent the stately charms and graces to which she had no claim.

"They know tea-time!" Sir Nigel said. "They have special buttered cakes made for them. See," (he put the dish into the pleased girl's hand and opened a window), "you shall feed them."

After a while Boisragon and Treherne lounged over to watch the pretty scene, the pretty girl distributing her favours among the jewelled beauties the while they curved their emerald shining necks and bent their diademed heads to the feast with stately condescension.

"Do look at that sweet mother. She is like a demure nun in a brown and white habit. And the two little darlings with their darling eyes beginning to bud in their tails!" Miss Treherne cried ecstatically. "Please Mr. Colville, frighten off that greedy old monster with the long tail while I feed the little ones."

Arthur, delighted to fulfil the behests of the only woman present, clapped his hands fiercely beside the patriarch's head, distracting his attention while the younger members of the brood and their gentle mother were regaled. The patriarch, presently discovering that he had been duped and that the cake-dish was empty, stalked off with an offended air, his fine tail sweeping the lawn like a court train.

Sir Nigel stood watching, his blue eyes keen and pleased,



reassuring with an occasional caress the jealous protests to which Fan every now and again gave tongue.

Then Arthur closed the window and he and the girl remained beside it watching the peacocks. Their meal over, they moved away leisurely making a serene circuitous track for their roosts, the levelling sun bathing them in golden light as they drifted across the lawns, creatures of idle bejewelled fancy.

Sir Nigel returned to the others. They had given no more than cursory abstracted glances to the scene. Fan, lingering a moment, suffered Miss Treherne's caresses with a bored air. Then she leapt down, and, following her master, ensconced herself once more beneath his chair.

"That dog simply worships him," Miss Treherne told Arthur. "I should do the same if I were his dog. He is delightful. He is simply crammed with cleverness and knowledge. There is nothing he doesn't know about history, or art, or poetry. I believe he must have read every book that has been written, and he has them all at his finger ends. And yet he is as kind and simple and interested in little things as it is possible for anyone to be."

"He does seem awfully decent," Arthur admitted. He admired Sir Nigel himself. But that was a different affair from endorsing his enthusiastic praises by a pretty girl.

"Awfully decent!" she repeated scornfully. "I call that sickly praise. He was our Member for years, and he took up wrongs and oppressions. The House used to tremble when he raged at it. Father says he used fairly to lash it. And he generally got what he wanted. He is my idea of a knight-errant—clever and chivalrous and yet not the least bit goody-goody or churchy. He does no end of things for the poor. He has all sorts of schemes and charities for his workmen. When he talks I could listen to him for hours he's so clever and amusing. And he is the best shot in the county. I just love him. That's the truth."

"Bully for him," commented Arthur grudgingly, his large eyes clouding.

She laughed. "Of course, he doesn't know how much I think of him. I wouldn't dare to let him know. He would think me terribly presuming."

"I'll go straight and tell him," Arthur threatened. "Presuming! He'd be charmed. It is cruel for him not to know he has such a devoted slave."

"Mr. Colville, I forbid you to say a word. I told you in absolute confidence," she cried in alarm.

"Won't I," said Arthur. "Hear me now."

He moved some steps toward the other group. "Sir Nigel!" he called. "Sir Nigel!"

In her concern she caught him by the sleeve.

"Oh, I shall die of shame," she cried in consternation.

"Oh no, you won't. I say, Sir Nigel," he called in a louder voice.

Sir Nigel turned his head. He had been deep in a discussion on Imperial policy.

"What is it?" he inquired absently.

"Why, Miss Treherne says—" Arthur began slowly.

She darted forward.

"Please don't let him tell you," she entreated. "It is something I don't wish him to say."

"Then I am sure he will not say it," Sir Nigel said. He smiled upon her eager face.

"But it's something you would like to hear, Sir," Arthur persisted. "Miss Treherne says—" He fixed his eyes maliciously upon her. "Miss Treherne says—You do all sorts of things for the poor."

He laughed boyishly. He had thoroughly alarmed her. And yet he had not betrayed confidence.

She drew a breath of relief. She laughed also, a bright ringing laugh.

"Miss Treherne generally says something more original than that," Sir Nigel observed drily. He glanced from one to the other. It was plain there was a little mystery. Then, as they continued to laugh, he also laughed in sympathy.

"If Mr. Colville is teasing you, Gwendolen," he said, "come here and sit by me."

"Fan will eat you," Arthur warned her.

"Oh, I am not afraid of Fan," she cried.

"Well, come then," Sir Nigel said, "if he is tormenting you."

"He isn't really tormenting me. At all events, not more



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than I can bear," she answered. She flashed up a coquettish gleam at him from under her long lashes.

"Well, torment him then," Sir Nigel counselled. He turned back to his discussion.

"If you love him so fondly as you say why didn't you go and sit on his knee as he invited you?" Arthur persisted, continuing to vex her.

"He didn't," she cried with a snap of temper. "You know he didn't. I'm not a child. And he isn't old enough. He's younger than any of us. He is full of ideals."

Her eyes filled with tears. She blushed emotionally. She bit her lips with vexation.

Arthur saw that he had gone too far.

"I'm frightfully sorry," he said. He moved up beside her. He smiled her his engaging smile. "Look here, Miss Treherne. You know I was only ragging. By the time I've known him as long as you I promise to be just as fond of him."

"Will you?" she said. She looked earnestly at him from her tear-bright eyes. "Oh, I am sure you will." They became fast friends.

"I say, Guv., Miss Treherne is a topping girl," he told Lord Boisragon as they were driving home. "Didn't you think so?"

"Her father's a pig-headed pragmatical fool," he returned ill-temperedly. "To hear him talk to me about the Colonies you'd have thought it was he and not I who had lived there twenty years."

"Why, I thought he seemed rather extra civil."

"It wasn't what he said. But he grinned in that stiff way and stared as though he were thinking: 'You're Lord Boisragon so I won't contradict you! But I'm of my own opinion still.'"

Arthur laughed.

"He has the disadvantage of a pair of china eyes," he said. "Ever see anything so odd? When I first saw him I thought to myself, 'Here's a chap with two glass eyes. How the deuce does he manage to see out of 'em?'"

His own glanced and danced. He was in great spirits.

"But his daughter's the jolliest girl. Her eyes are right

enough. Ripping pretty sort of eyes I call them. Such fun in them. And did you ever see such eyelashes? I'm going up to play golf with her. They've got a putting links."

"All right," his father said sulkily. He glanced at Arthur's bright impressionable face. He seemed out of humour. "Only remember," he added, "she'll have no more than a beggarly fifty thousand pounds, and for that she'll have to wait for Treherne's death. I don't suppose he'd give her more than ten or fifteen thousand on her marriage."

Arthur scoffed lightly.

"Why, what does it matter? I'm not thinking of marrying her."

"Perhaps not," his father said. He laughed roughly. "Better men than you have been tied up fast when they haven't been thinking about it."

"Oh well," Arthur returned philosophically, "I know I've got to marry money. But a man must be civil and get a bit of fun out of life. And, after all, I call it beastly luck having one's choice limited by anything."

"Oh! you want the earth with a nickel-plated fence about it," his father asserted brusquely. "Most of us do. But none of us get it."

"I say, Guv., Arthur said, with a caressing affection in his dark glance. "What's the matter with you? You do seem out of temper."

"Perhaps I am," Lord Boisragon answered, rousing himself out of a heavy gloom. "It must have been that pragmatical fool Treherne. His eyes swung about like a couple of search-lights."

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## CHAPTER XV.

## NESTA DRUMMOND.

A lovely being scarcely formed or moulded.  
A Rose with all its sweetest leaves yet folded.

ONE Sunday afternoon Camilla, caught in a little drift of persons edging slowly out of church, felt a hand fall upon her shoulder, heard a voice exclaim in her ear:

"Camilla Braeburn, by all that's astonishing! How in the world do you come to be here?"

With even more astonishment than the speaker's, she looked round upon a well-known face. A handsome bonnet crowned it. Below it, muffling her to the chin, dropped one of the handsomest sable cloaks a tribe of munificently furred little creatures ever grew upon their backs.

"Cousin Caroline!" she exclaimed in incredulous undertones.

The stranger clutched her by the arm as though, having found, she had no intention of allowing her to escape.

So they eased their way down the narrow crowded aisle, the congregation eyeing the newcomer inquisitively.

"Explain yourself," Camilla laughed when they found themselves in the open. "Have you dropped from the skies?"

"In that case there wouldn't be much of me left," the other retorted, glancing significantly down upon the plumpness whereto her befurred condition added. "I have taken a house here for two months. Do you know Gweal Court? Nesta is with me. But come now, here is the carriage, and

it is beginning to rain. You positively must drive back with me to tea."

When they were seated, "Tell me about yourself," she resumed. "What, in the name of wonder, has brought you here? And where are you stopping?"

"At Pentagel."

"Gracious! You are with the Harlands."

"I am nursing Lady Harland. Do you know them?"

"Know them! Why, I've known Sir Nigel for years, though we came here for the first time last spring. I never knew his wife. They tell me she is an absolute imbecile."

"She is very helpless."

"We liked the place so well last year that we have come again. And shall come yet again, perhaps. It freshens Nesta for the season. It is the soft air, I think, that gives her a complexion. You haven't seen her for some time. She's considered quite a beauty."

"It is four years since I saw her."

"So long! How time does fly. Really, you treat your relatives very badly."

"She was at school in Paris when I last called to see you," Camilla said.

"But about you. I heard you had to leave the Hospital. How well you are looking. Camilla, why in Heaven's name don't you do something better for yourself than nursing? With your looks—it is perfectly absurd."

Camilla laughed. "I am very happy," she said. "I hated the thought of leaving London and the Hospital. But Pentagel is so beautiful. The life is so dignified and delightful. Now I begin to wonder how I ever tolerated anything else."

"That is the first sensible thing I've heard you say for years," her cousin retorted with conviction.

She was fair and plump and practical, a widow with means and a beautiful daughter. She radiated an atmosphere of opulence and good humour. Everybody liked her for this reason. In reality, she was neither very opulent nor very good-humoured. The atmosphere was physical—the aura of a body excellently nourished by reason of an admirable digestion and muscles disinclined to exertion.

She was subject to bronchitis. She told people her chest was delicate. Her doctors—wise men!—named her no names. But they counselled, so far as they dared, limitations in diet. She admitted that her grandfather had been subject to gout.

"But then," she would add, "he drank a couple of bottles of port every day of his life, poor dear old soul!"

She was a second cousin of Camilla on her father's side. She had always been cordial to her when they met. But she had not gone out of her way to meet her.

According to the code by which she ruled her life there was no reason why she should. She was candid always with Camilla. She found her sympathetic, sincere, and to be trusted. Moreover, she did not move in her set. It was a satisfaction to be candid with somebody. She aimed at being popular, and popularity and candour are as oil and vinegar.

"We hope to see something of the Boisragons," she told Camilla presently. "We spent November in Egypt—my poor lungs, you know, dear! We met Lord Boisragon and his son on the boat coming home. Arthur Colville is a charming young man. He admired Nesta immensely. They will be a pleasant addition to the neighbourhood. I shall be glad when Nesta is settled. I feel her a great responsibility. She is so much admired that I feel it on my conscience lest she should not do so well as she ought. Sometimes I think that when she is settled I shall like to end my days in the country with poultry and a cow."

Camilla laughed.

"You have not one instinct for it," she said. "You would be bored to death."

Cousin Caroline sighed pleasantly.

"Perhaps I should. After all, habit is second nature. And I have always been afraid of cows."

Gweal Court was a broad old-fashioned house, with a red roof lying low on its brows. It was muffled to the eyes with ivy. It wore an air of having been once a habitation of consequence. But with the springing up all round it of more imposing homes, it had assumed a tone of shrinking diffidence like a poor and elderly relation, conscious of breed-

ing and of quondam importance but overawed by the pretensions of a younger and more showy generation. It passed its life in being let furnished, "an agreeable gentleman's residence," standing in several acres of old, wild garden, turfу lawns and tangled shrubs and flowers. There was an air of dejection over it as though it were conscious of having fallen upon evil days. Its ivy coat, drawn up to its ears, gave an impression of a shabby old gentleman, who, sensible of frayed linen, has carefully turned up the collar of his great coat. Within the coat you would have sworn there were shiny seams and tags where buttons had been.

In the long drawing-room, its oak panelled ceiling so low as to move tall persons to stoop on entering for fear of knocking heads (although, in truth, there was no likelihood of this), a girl was sitting at one of three windows.

The blinds were drawn, plunging the room in semi-darkness. The girl turned her head languidly at the sound of steps.

"Is that you, Mother?" she said indifferently.

Seeing a stranger, she rose, and, with a trace of confusion, began to tug off a pair of white gloves in which her hands were encased.

"Oh, you need not mind," her mother said. "It is only Camilla Braeburn. Nesta has been using a little preparation for her hands," she added to Camilla, explaining the gloves. "In the country she finds they roughen so."

The two shook hands, looking into one another's faces with that keen interest good-looking women bestow upon one another.

"Imagine!" Mrs. Drummond continued, "Camilla is living at Pentagel. She is nursing Lady Harland."

"How horrid!" Nesta commented. "Don't you find it a bore."

While Camilla insisted otherwise, Mrs. Drummond proceeded to draw up the blinds.

"We will have tea," she said, "at once. You remember, Camilla always did have to keep hours. I don't think there's enough light left to hurt. Nesta is so fair," she further explained to Camilla. "She tans in the country if she sits in a glare."



## NESTA DRUMMOND.

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With the added light, Camilla and the girl renewed their interest in one another.

Nesta was fair indeed. Her complexion suggested a sea-shell, so smooth it was and sweetly and delicately tinted. Perhaps to a keen observer it would have shown as equally emotionless.

Her hair, which was gathered in a Clytie knot upon her beautiful nape, was like a bunch of brown sea-weed, or the red-brown of a fading leaf. Her eyes were large and finely formed, sea-green in colour, and of a rare liquidity. The long lashes were thick and seemed to be dusted with gold. The brows were arched and dark and also gold-dusted. Her tall, slim figure, tightly corsetted beneath a gown of flowing lines, gave an impression that it would snap at a touch, it was so delicate and slender. Her gait was that affected by the woman of the period, too upright, too smart and alert for womanly grace.

Camilla looked at her with sincere admiration. She found her very lovely. She returned the gaze, with the slightly displeased look of a beauty who resents rivalry, and, moreover, of the very young beauty who regards beauty as the prerogative of the very young.

Her charm lay in her threefold perfections of chiselling, pencilling and tinting. Her face lacked the nobility of Camilla's, which, inferior in form, was superior in expression and in its suggestion of moral quality. While Nesta's eyes were beautiful in shape and colour, Camilla's were also beautiful with thought and feeling.

"So, you are still nursing," Nesta observed, in a tone of indulgent distaste.

Camilla wondered whether she knew or whether she had never troubled to realise that she had no other means of living.

"I am still nursing," she said, "I shall always be nursing."

Nesta examined her pink, charming nails.

"How odd it is," she said, "that you should be at Pentagel. We have known Sir Nigel for years."

"Not a bit odd," her mother cried. "I am always telling you what a small world it is."

"The world is large enough," Camilla said. "It is that

people move in little circles, and all those in a circle are liable to meet."

"But you can scarcely be said to move in our circle," Nesta observed.

"I must," Camilla said, "seeing that we belong to the same family. I don't move in the same glittering, fashionable zone, I admit."

"I don't believe you wish to," Nesta said, with a curt little laugh. She felt aggrieved that Camilla should not envy her most enviable position.

And all the while she wondered how Camilla managed to keep her looks seeing that she could have but little time to devote to them. She did not realise that looks which come from qualities gain nothing from complexion washes.

"No, I don't wish to move in glittering circles," Camilla returned. "I am quite happy as I am."

"Sir Nigel, I am sure, would be nice to anybody living in his house," her mother said. "What a pity it is he has no son." She glanced at Nesta. "It is such a handsome property, and such a grand old name. And that beautiful house of his in Eaton Square is scarcely opened from one year's end to another. Unless, perhaps, they open the windows to air it."

"He must find it frightfully stupid, living here all the time," Nesta put in. "There can be absolutely nothing going on."

"He is always busy," Camilla said. "He has so many interests and does so much."

"Oh, I meant social things, of course, and functions," Nesta explained, shaking out her skirts.

"He knows the Boisragnons, no doubt," Mrs. Drummond said.

Camilla understood so.

"Then, perhaps, they will be at Pentagel next Wednesday. We are dining there, Camilla. Sir Nigel called last week to invite us."

Nesta looked up sharply.

"Do you think Cecile will let me have my new frock in time, Mother?" she asked, a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"I shall send her a wire in the morning," her mother said.

Soon after tea Camilla rose to leave.  
"I have to keep hours, as you say, Cousin Caroline," she said, smiling.

"Will you walk part of the way with me?" she suggested to Nesta. "The rain is over. You look pale. A walk will do you good. I suppose you do walk."

"Walk!" her mother said, when she had gone to put on her hat, "she is a famous walker. Although she looks fragile, it is difficult to tire her. She walks, rides, golfs, shoots, sings, recites, skirt-dances, acts, and will sit up half the night playing Bridge, and be quite fresh next day. How the modern girls do all they do is more than I can say. I was considered strong when I was young, though girls were not so strong then as they are now. We had more sentiment, and were fond of people. Camilla, I sometimes think that the girls of to-day care neither for God nor man," she added, with a little emotional outburst.

She sat silent for a minute, a helpless, bewildered expression on her pleasant face. "Sometimes I feel almost frightened about it," she resumed. "It seems so unnatural. There is Nesta now. Although I have nobody but her and she has nobody but me and I've done everything in the world for her, yet if I were to die, I honestly believe she would order her black with less thought of me than of the fit of it. I would not, of course, say so to anybody else. But I don't believe she has that much heart in all her body." She showed the tip of a plump little finger.

Nesta came in at the moment wearing a broad, black hat of lace and chiffon. A mass of plumes drooped softly over her face, setting mysterious shadows under her eyes. She made such a presentment of charming girlhood that Camilla was unable to accept her mother's version of her. Yet, observing her more closely as they walked, she perceived that she was bloodless, and that when her cameo features were not consciously animated, a species of bored lifelessness fell upon them. Her voice was high-pitched and thin. Her white hands were almost fleshless. Her atmosphere was cold. When Camilla kissed her at parting, the tinted, dainty cheek was chill; her kiss lacked warmth and vitality.

"Go back now," Camilla enjoined her, realising these things. "Perhaps I ought not to have brought you. You look tired!"

"Tired!" she repeated. "I am perfectly fresh. I seldom feel tired."

It occurred to Camilla that, perhaps, it was her brain and emotions that had suffered: that her heart had shrunk, as her mother suggested, to the size of a mere finger-tip, for the reason that their forces had been otherwise absorbed. She remembered how, as a little child, Cousin Caroline, eager to train and develop every scrap of talent in her, had scarcely allowed her a minute's leisure. She had been always in evidence, busy with masters and mistresses whose rôle it was to spur her poor little wits to the utmost. She had been allowed no leisure for the storing of power and development of character. Camilla was sorry for her. She had the impression that the charming sea-shell beauty was little more than a shell, the living creature in it extinct.

In the returning health each day of her new tranquil life in the fine Camelcarbis air was bringing to herself, she was conscious of a thousand impulses and thrilling powers, wholly lacking in her beautiful young cousin. The beauty had been trained and over-trained, until she had become a mere elegant mechanism. The wholesome wind did not even bring the blood a-tingle in her cheeks.

"Are you happy, dear?" Camilla asked, with a sudden rush of sympathy. She caught the pretty delicate hand in her firm one.

"Happy!" Nesta echoed, astonished. She turned and stared into Camilla's face. She withdrew her hand shyly, as though she were embarrassed by the little show of affection.

"I am, of course. I scarcely ever have a dull hour. Why, I believe," she added, with a touch of undisguised chagrin, "I believe for some reason or other you are actually pitying me."

Camilla laughed. "Oh, no," she disclaimed.

"Is it because I am not settled?" Nesta continued. "Remember this will only be my third season, and girls don't marry now in their teens. Of course, I could have been married long ago, and married well. Mother will tell you.

But it is foolish to be in a hurry, and to take second best when by waiting a little longer one might have a chance of the best. I am only nineteen," she insisted, with a half-offended air.

"To me it seems very young," Camilla said.

She felt a warm maternal impulse to gather the cold little beauty into her arms and teach her a nobler creed of life. Her cameo face suggested girlish innocence and sweetness. Yet, here was she talking of herself and her woman's future, as though these were things to be put upon the scales and bartered across a counter.

"I am twenty-seven," she added, "and I have seen so much more of life."

Nesta broke into a hard little laugh. "Oh," she cried, genuinely amused, "how you talk, Camilla! As though one sees anything but dirty, common people buried as you have been in stuffy hospitals. Mother and I go everywhere and see everything. Why, a year ago Lord Harry Chelvers, a married man, twice my age, with several children, wanted me to elope with him. I told him I was far too clever to do such an absurd thing."

She laughed—a mirthless laugh, with not a note of youth in it. She canted her beautiful face with an air of triumph.

"He ought to have been horse-whipped," Camilla cried indignantly.

"Oh, we don't do things like that—in the world," the girl said. "One takes such things as a matter of course. It would be terribly provincial to seem to mind them. He and I are still excellent friends—now that he understands that I am not a little fool."

While Camilla reflected.

"But you're not really twenty-seven," she resumed. "You don't look much older than I do. Tell me what you use for your skin."

"Rain-water," Camilla said. "Since I have been here, that is. At the hospital I had no time to think about it, nor rain-water to use."

"You are more human than you were," Nesta commented shrewdly. "At the hospital you would not have cared."

"Perhaps not," Camilla admitted.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A NOSEGAY.

Each time we love  
We turn a nearer and a broader mark  
To that keen archer Sorrow, and he strikes.

"WHERE *have* you been?" Nurse Hanson greeted her in tones of remonstrance. She came out of the house dressed for walking as Camilla approached it. She was on her way to church.

Her views were high. She acted up to them with rigour. She wore a crucifix; she fasted on appointed days. Twice a week she walked two miles after her night's vigil to attend an early service, fasting.

"I waited tea for you quite twenty minutes," she further reproved Camilla.

"I am sorry you should have done so," Camilla said. She felt bright and in spirits after her walk and her re-union with friends. She had come to realise her colleague's excellent qualities and made allowance for her lack of manners.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter in the least," her colleague said, disarmed by her apology. "I can drink tea that's black with standing and never turn a hair. Indeed, I rather like it. But have you had your tea? I asked them to keep some for you. I knew you didn't know anybody here and would want it after sitting in that icy church."

"I met friends," Camilla said. "It was quite a surprise. My cousin, Mrs. Drummond, has taken Gweal Court. She drove me back to tea."

"Why!" the other exclaimed, impressed, "you don't mean to say Mrs. Drummond is a friend of yours—the Hon. Mrs. Sydney Drummond? She and her daughter were here last year."

"She is a cousin."

"She is quite a swell," Nurse Hanson said, with manifest respect. "You never mentioned that you had a cousin who was an 'Honourable.'"

"No," Camilla said, perceiving that the other waited for an explanation, or, at all events, for an acknowledgment of the phenomenon.

"How nice to be related to people like that," she commented enviously. "Why! they go to Court and have their portraits in the fashionable papers. Once I saw their portraits in a group with the King and Queen. Miss Drummond is quite one of the admired beauties. How I should like to know them! Do they tell you interesting things about their Majesties?"

"If they do," Camilla promised, smiling, "I will remember to keep them for you."

"Now that *is* good of you. It must be delightful to hear things first-hand, and not to be afraid all the time that perhaps, after all, they were only made up by the papers. But I must not stop longer. I shall be late for church. And if you do like a second cup of tea you'll find it waiting for you, Miss Braeburn." She began to hurry on.

"How is Cicero?" Camilla called after her.

She turned and threw her a penetrating glance. There was a half pathetic appeal in it lest Camilla should be making fun at the expense of her pet. Camilla saw it and became at once serious. Her expression satisfied the other.

"You really did like him then—a little bit?" she said, her prominent eyes lighting. "He has been such a darling to-day. Such spirits! And he really almost speaks! I left him nibbling a sardine—he loves sardines, and I gave him one to console him till I get back. Well! it really seems as though I never should start. Good-bye, Miss Braeburn."

She darted off, a somewhat jaunty grey tweed suit sitting badly on her spare frame, a cheap black hat with a wreath of yellow foxgloves in it looking out of keeping with the tweed

suit. She looked far better in her uniform. But this she would not have believed had Worth himself assured her of it.

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Benson rose quickly as Camilla returned to the sick-room. She wore a pleased self-conscious air. She took a bunch of flowers from a vase and began to pin it into her bodice.

"You're always punctual, Nurse Braeburn," she said.

Camilla nodded with a friendly smile. "Every Sunday you have a lovely buttonhole, Benson," she said. "Is it from an admirer?"

Benson's face sobered.

"I'm not anything to admire, Nurse Braeburn," she said grimly, "though I once rather fancied my looks like other young folks. Once I'd a fresh colour and my hair was black and glossy. I was proud of it and used to brush it a good deal. But a life like mine, day in, day out, don't leave any freshness in you. And my hair's gone piebald."

"As for the nosegays," she resumed, "why, Lewis, the gardener, and me have walked out these twenty years. He always used to send me a nosegay every Sunday when I was younger. And he's kept to it. He was only an under-gardener then. He's 'head' now. We was to have been married when her ladyship took ill. And then I wouldn't leave her in her state. And so we've been waiting ever since."

She glanced to where the invalid lay moaning stupidly. Her grim face with its brindled hair and the burning dark eyes was a tragedy.

"I am so sorry," Camilla said, a sympathetic thrill in her voice. She laid a soft hand on the other's hard one.

Benson flushed. Her thin lips trembled. She drew the back of a bony hand across her eyes.

"I'm sure you're very kind," she said rather stiffly, as though disuse had made the mechanism of her emotions rusty. "It's been a trial of course. And it's hard on him. It isn't many men would have been so faithful, and me growing into what I have. But, of course, I couldn't leave her. Not that she was ever anything but selfish to me and to

everybody else. But there's a feeling about it now she's so dependent."

With a return of her self-consciousness she glanced down at the flowers in her bodice. "And he still sends the button-holes," she concluded. She sighed harshly.

"He is proud of you," Camilla said with feeling. "Any man would be."

She shook her head.

"They think more of your being young and fresh-looking."

"It is plain that Lewis doesn't," Camilla insisted.

Her face lighted.

"No, Nurse, *he* don't seem to," she said. "But he's one in a thousand."

"Well, now, don't keep him waiting," Camilla exhorted her, smiling. "He is too good a man to be kept waiting."

"Oh, he'll never notice minutes," she returned drily, "seeing he's been waiting twenty years."

After she had gone Camilla was allowed no time to reflect upon the dreary little drama, for the patient suddenly roused herself and became distressingly clamorous.

A number of expedients were resorted to before it was revealed that the clamour was for a fresh toilette. It was nearly her bed-time. But Camilla knew that her night-attendants would obtain but little peace if her whim had not been gratified. She brought dress after dress from the wardrobe before a selection was made. Then came the difficulty of procuring help, the services of more than one person being indispensable. The maids had gone for their Sunday evening recreation or to church. Eventually Mrs. Merritt was summoned from her room, where she had been entertaining a little party of friends.

The painful process was achieved with groans and struggles. The invalid was once again transferred to her couch at the fire. When her mirror had been adjusted to her taste she lay in her fresh fineries glowering with evil eyes at her reflection.



## CHAPTER XVII.

## NATURE.

I am the owner of the sphere,  
Of the seven stars and the solar year,  
Of Cæsar's hand, and Plato's brain,  
Of Lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain.

CAMILLA awoke to the singing of birds. Jubilant in a variety of keys they were fluting to themselves and to one another the joyous news that spring was coming. Their hearts seemed to be in their throats, so sweet and vibrant were their notes. Sonorous and richest was the clarionet call of the blackbird, deep, honeyed, and alluring.

As in a crowded street men move this way and that, crossing one another's paths, jogging one another's elbows, this one pushing forward, that one going at his ease, another standing with expectant face, each impelled by his particular motive, picking his way like a shuttle threading among many threads, so in this tangle of voices the heart of each, a darting shuttle, threw each slender thread of sweetness straight to its appointed goal. No bird marked in the many-throated chorus any other melody than that of its mate. Others were a mere accompaniment. Even the tiny wren, her tail and her nose in the air with dainty coquetry, allowed no imperious larger bird to drown the sweetness of her mate's call.

Camilla lay listening with raptured ears. It was a windless day. The sea lapped the shore with the rhythm of a quiet breathing, the gentle heaving of a mother-bosom. She threw back in her mind to that morning some weeks earlier when she had waked for the first time at Pentagel.

She contrasted the recollection of those leaden limbs and the smoke-fogged mind, which the call of the pheasant had roused, with the freshness and calm now possessing her.

In those weeks of tranquillity she had learned a thousand things. Her body from being a mere implement of toil had become an instrument of vital harmonies, from which every sight and sound, every breath of life and nature, were beginning to elicit enchanting melodies.

Following upon the null impassiveness inseparable from mental and muscular fatigue, the new richness of sense and thrilling health she had begun to feel appeared to her almost a sensuality. Could it be right to so enjoy? And yet was it not ungracious to refuse to listen when the birds sang, or to look when the seas and skies and flowers prepared their ever fresh and sweet surprises? And, having looked and listened, was it not thankless not to enjoy?

She began to see that life was more complex than she had supposed; that work and duty by no means comprise the whole art of living. Work and duty are but the salt of life. The soul asks for sweetness. Without play for the emotions and imagination man degenerates into a mere mechanism. Yet how many millions of persons, she reflected, live and die without having known more of life than the routine performance of mean, unelevating tasks!

Moved by the same sweet half-unconscious instincts which were embroidering the skies with song, she slipped out of bed. Her bath and a can of cold water stood ready. She would be Spartan this morning and bathe as the birds had done at the temperature of Nature. In a mood of auroral fancy she imagined the small pool of water she poured from the can a secluded pool in the depths of some untrodden wood, a bath poured by dews and Heaven's rain into a tender hollow of Nature's hand.

She sponged its bracing freshness over her, and was taken with the guilty sense that never before in her life had she been sufficiently grateful for the miraculous gift of water. Clear and limpid it supplies the sacred purifying element wherein man, sweat-stained and dusty, renews and sweetens his body until he is as speckless as a little child. A few degrees of temperature transform it to a wonder-world of snow-fields,



of crystal peaks which serve for an everlasting joy and sermon to mankind; or make a broad and trusty back of it to bridge rivers and join friends whom a week before it had separated. By means of it we carry summer into winter, preserving the kindly fruits and meats. By means of it we carry winter into summer, cooling our throats with its snows.

The sick man, the suffering man, the chilled man, the exhausted man, what a boon to all these is the bath, the lave, the draught furnished by hot water! It is one of those miracles in which because we have grown used to it we see but a common thing.

The whole aspect of life changes when our eyes open and we begin to see the miracle in the common thing. For then we live surrounded by miracles instead of by merely common things.

Camilla, emerging from her bath, no longer shunned the beautiful person confronting her out of her mirror. The image no longer jarred with her creed. Her creed was no longer a hard and rigid counsel of utility. She had begun to realise that beauty is as useful as utility is beautiful. She was proud and grateful to be wholesome and finely formed in a world which nature has crammed with lovely wonders. Thinking back upon the ugliness and deformity she had seen in hospitals her soul was filled with a great pity. She realised that to be comely and good and vigorous is the birthright of all. She saw disease and pain and wickedness as crimes against a creation which makes all the while for moral and physical perfection.

She sang to herself as she dressed. Like the birds her body thrilled with the mysterious impulses of spring.

Every spring when her hands are teeming with the budding lives of flowers and the mating hearts of creatures, Nature cries to men and women also to renew their health and beauty. She throws her clear disparaging light upon them. "Winter has left you shabby and chilled," she tells them. "Come to my woods and fields and waters and I will give you warm new life. Borrow my pigments for your faded blood and skin." She fills them with languors that they may seek leisure, may doff their stupid hastes to be rich and clever, may learn to be healthy and happy.

Camilla observed with a new delight the fine condition of her skin, the clearness of her eyes, the lustre of her hair, the red of her lips. For the first time she became self-conscious. Looking into her mirror she found her eyes asking her wondering questions which her mind had never asked. Her body seemed to have become the habitation of another self, a nature-sprite, a nymph of woods and skies and waters, a sylvan foster-sister, by whose kinship she was made kin with woods and skies and waters.

"*I am as old as the Hills and as young as the Skies,*" the maiden told her.

"*I was when Mammoths warred. I have dwelled in the crystal, have lived in the leaf.*

"*I have leapt in the blood of the Tiger, have slept in the heart of the Dove.*

"*I am Maid. I am Wife. I am Mother. I am Babe. I am Widow.*

"*Neath tropic suns I have served my lord in the wigwam.*

"*For me that pearl of tears, the Taj Mahal, was shed.*

"*As a Pagan Priestess my knife has been sheathed in the heart of the victim.*

"*I have died a meek-eyed Christian maiden torn by lions for the love of my Sweet Saviour.*

"*I have sat on Thrones.*

"*I have been yoked a naked slave to a Tyrant's chariot.*

"*I was Briseis the fair-cheeked in the tent of Achilles.*

"*I was Ruth. I was the Magdalen.*

"*The most just of judges forswore his honour when I, Phryne, unveiled my loveliness.*

"*Immaculate with other noble Virgins I have fed the vestal fires.*

"*All that a Woman can know I have known. For all the knowledge you can find in books, I can give you Living Wisdoms.*

"*Step by step in blood and anguish I have dragged my bruised weary way, climbing the Steeps of Progress.*

"*I am Heredity. I am Evolution.*

"*My lives have been as countless as the drops in Ocean, some but the soft ephemeral minute of the moth. But as marble, shaped by the dripping of water, shows no record of the single*

*drop, so my Spirit fashioned by those lives retains no memory of single lives.*

*" Yet if you will take my hand and wander with me amid Nature's solitudes, wander and wonder and forget the stupid world, which remembers only to-day and yesterday, I who have lived in the wind and the sea and the crystal will teach you Truths and Mysteries older than the hills and younger than the skies."*

Camilla, putting on her hat and cloak, accepted the nymph's invitation. Taking her hand she ran down the stairs, while the house was sleeping, and wandered with her through the dewy solitudes of the gardens. She returned with a mind magic-charged. The nymph had unlocked all avenues of consciousness. And the auroral sunshine and the immaculate morning had yielded her their wealth.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

## SIR NIGEL INSISTS.

Brave were his eyes, and frank his mien,  
Of all men's faces, calm or keen,  
A better I have never seen.

"You smell like the woods, Nurse Braeburn," Benson greeted her. "Have you been out—or is it scent on your handkerchief?"

Camilla smiled. "It isn't scent," she said. "It is the woods."

"It makes a person feel she's been for a walk when you come into the room. And you've got such a nice colour." She sighed wearily. "We had a tiresome night with her."

She looked worn out. Her hands shook as she made her preparations for the invalid's attire.

Camilla had already heard the story from Miss Hanson. The latter, however, had the art of preserving an imperceptible calm through all vexations. The patient's moaning distressed her little more than it would have distressed a deaf woman.

"She has nothing to moan about," she would comment practically. "I have done all I can for her. One cannot do more."

So she would calmly return to her book or her work.

But on this occasion she had been compelled to rouse Benson several times during the night in order to interpret the invalid's demands.

"You shall go to your room and rest when we have dressed her," Camilla insisted; "or take a walk. I can manage perfectly well by myself."

Benson shook her head.

"It's no use sparing yourself," she said dejectedly.

It was plain that something unusual was depressing her. It presently transpired.

"Lewis had it out with me again last night," she confessed. "He's got sick of waiting. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to hear he's taken on with someone else."

Her lean cheek was drawn in a spasm.

Camilla supported him valiantly.

"I think he is right to speak," she said. "You have done more than your duty. It seems only fair to consider him after he has been so patient. You are not well. You need, and more than deserve, a rest."

She smiled grimly.

"I guess I shall get my rest," she said significantly.

"What do you mean?"

She would not answer.

"Lewis has been talking to Sir Nigel," she resumed. "I expect Sir Nigel will speak to me about it. He is always saying I ought to go and let somebody younger and stronger take my place. 'There's Three Elms Farm for you, Benson,' he says, 'with a cow, and a dairy of your own whenever you like to go to it.' There's nobody does things like Sir Nigel."

"Well, I hope he will insist."

She shook her head again.

"I shall stop and do for her as long as I can stand. I've been with her all these years. And I'm not going to leave her now. Why, his life wouldn't be worth having if I wasn't here to stop them running to him whenever she's a bit more bothersome than usual. And such a life as he's already had with her!"

When he came, he came over at once to where Benson stood with Camilla, at the end of the room. The sick woman lay quiet on her couch. Her disturbed night had left her passive and amenable.

Sir Nigel wore a determined face. He bore down on



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Benson with a swift and masterful step. He bade Camilla "Good-morning." Then he faced Benson.

"I have been talking to Lewis," he said, fixing her with dominant eyes. "I will not allow you to sacrifice yourself further. This morning I have taken steps to find her ladyship another maid. As soon as you are ready—" He broke off.

Her silence deceived him. His stern air relaxed. He held his hand for hers, with a kind smile.

"I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done," he added gently. He shook her hand cordially. "Three Elms Farm is ready. I hope you and Lewis will be happy."

Then Benson spoke. She straightened her gaunt shoulders. A gleam darted into the tragic blackness of her eyes.

"If you think you're going to get rid of me so easily, Sir Nigel," she said doggedly, "you're making a mistake. Thank you kindly about the Farm"—she dropped him a curtsey, in which respect and rebellion struggled. "But as I've said all along, I'll never leave her ladyship—nor you, Sir Nigel—as long as I can stand. And that's my answer."

They stood confronting one another. It was the conflict of a stern and of an obstinate will. Then in an iron voice:

"Suppose," he said, "I were to give you three months' salary and say 'Go now.'"

"You'd never do it after all these years," she cried, her black eyes blazing, her frame tense.

For the space of an instant his imperious spirit seemed upon the point of doing the thing she challenged him to do. The next, he bent his head in a gesture of respect. "You are right," he said. "I shall not do it."

Again: "Can you not be persuaded?"

"No, Sir," she said. After her flare of rebellion her face and voice were once more grim and respectful. "If you remember, I've always been one that could only see things my own way."

"Take a month's rest at the Farm."

"Thank you," she returned obstinately. "But I'll take my rest at my appointed time."

With a gesture of protest he dismissed the subject, and returned up the room.

He seated himself beside the couch and proceeded to read from his correspondence.

"I faced him that time," Benson whispered to Camilla. She was trembling from head to foot. "I couldn't do it again. I shall slip upstairs for fear he says anything more."

Camilla sat busy with her lint and bandages. Now and again she paused in the plying of her scissors, and bent a charmed ear to the fine voice, with its distinguished cadence—as she had earlier bent a charmed ear to the birds. But the birds had spoken only to her senses, this voice, expressing as it did generation upon generation of cultured breeding, infinitely pleased her mind.

The room was long, and its superfluity of draperies and curtains so muffled sound that she only occasionally caught the sense of what he read. It was not for this she listened. The voice, resonant and clear, with its exquisite inflexions, made a classic of the commonplace. And he read to one who lay insensate, staring at her image in the glass, or with her lids dropped in chilling inattention.

When she was listening she but dimly understood. For the most part she was not listening. Yet so tyrannical was the remnant of intelligence within the distraught brain, that on any morning, when absence from home or affairs prevented him from coming, her attendants suffered for his omission by a day of merciless exactions.

Benson's little combat with him had interested Camilla. He had shown so masterful and yet so human. His smile when he had believed her vanquished had been so full of whimsical kindness, touched, too, with a little self-congratulation at the success of his tactics. When she resisted, there had been a characteristic moment of hauteur, a realisation of the position of master and servant. Again he had melted, and with respect for her self-sacrificing motive had allowed her the victory.

He was one of those strong men, who, sensitive and impressionable, have schooled themselves to act in the important things of life only from conviction.

His convictions were not always right. Camilla, indeed, had heard some of the actions proceeding from them hardly criticised. But all such, she had perceived, were so obviously against his own interests, that only principle or honest error could have inspired them. His treatment of one person would show as unsympathetic, even hard. To another he would be indulgent to a fault. He combined a shrewd and subtle, oftentimes ironic, estimate of men and affairs with an altruistic conception of his duty and relation toward them. "Quixotic" was a term very frequently applied to him. He kept himself poor by a number of philanthropies. He gave munificently in one case, withheld rigorously in another, to all appearance equally deserving.

Mrs. Merritt, from whom Camilla had learned all she knew of him, told her "When first I came to Pentagel I sometimes felt quite vexed with him for what seemed inconsistent, even unjust, in his dealings. But I have so often seen him proved right that now I am afraid to pit my judgment against his. He is so quick in reading character and motive that he knows the rights of things years, perhaps, before they're proved to most of us. His mind travels like lightning. There is nothing he doesn't see and see through. And when the time comes he acts. I've known him ten years, but I've only known him two. It took me the first eight years to learn that I wasn't clever enough to understand him."

Camilla, recalling these things from time to time, lifted interested looks to him. She saw him glance at the invalid questioningly as he laid down one letter and took up another. Once she detected a mood of weary distaste in his face, once heard a note of it in his voice.

All of a sudden, observing the fine, imaginative head and the play of mind and feeling in the face, she was taken with twin impulses of admiration for his chivalry and compassion for his fate. For the first time she realised the whole barbarity of the situation—the man's high intelligence and sensitiveness chained to a senseless log. Her eyes filled with tears.

Surprised at her emotion, she stole up her handkerchief to dry them quietly and quickly. In that moment his glance flashed up and found her.

Their eyes met—met and exchanged as they had done once before. His lingered a moment. Then he smiled her a quick little smile of sympathy, significantly kind and mournful. She, too, had her sorrows.

He returned immediately to his reading. When presently he rose to leave, he remained a moment standing. His eyes sought hers with a swift, encouraging glance. It seemed to bid her take heart. His demeanour was impersonal and detached, his glance the signal of a soul across the world of common things to another soul in distress, such a look as a martyr at the stake might cast to another.

When he had gone she was overtaken by confusion. She had unwittingly defrauded him of sympathy for an emotion on her part of which he himself had been the cause.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE SECRET CUPBOARD.

Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it.

THE doctor came in soon. Every day he went through a ceremonial of solemn questions, making some infinitesimal change in the routine of treatment. Every day the patient listened with flattered ears, an expression of complacent self-commiseration on her face. It was the one occasion upon which it seemed to her that her condition was receiving due attention.

This morning she directed his notice to a hand which she intimated had been causing her distress. There was nothing to be seen. His punctilious examination revealed no cause of trouble. But before he left the suffering member had been swathed in lint and bandaged. She lay with a satisfied smile hugging the formless member amid her frills and laces like a child hugging a new toy.

"If Dr. Brattleton wasn't to humour and please her," Benson told Camilla, "I don't know what we should do. She's had every other doctor for miles about. She took a dislike to one after another. Dr. Brattleton is the last and has been coming the longest. But any day she may shut her eyes and turn away her head, and then there'll be a nice to-do. There isn't another doctor nearer than a distance of ten miles. Sir Nigel has spoken of a resident. But she'd probably take a dislike to him after a few days."

The beautiful morning having clouded over, ending in an afternoon of heavy rain, Camilla could not drive. She insisted upon it that Benson should rest in her room while she remained with the patient.

She brought down her writing-case, and, after an interval

of ceaseless small exactions, which she cheerfully fulfilled, she was left free to answer a little batch of letters. She carried her writing-case to a recess in a window, where she could make the best of the dulled light and could keep the patient under observation.

She had been writing for some time when a sound attracted her. She looked up to find that her charge had slipped noiselessly from her couch and was shuffling with difficulty along the floor. Her difficulty was increased by the circumstance of her bandaged hand. She made her way almost without sound, creeping slowly on hands and knees. Now and again she stifled a groan of pain. As she went she glanced furtively in the direction of the door. Once she apparently thought she heard somebody coming. Immediately she crouched limp and motionless upon the floor, the almost eager intention that had come into her face exchanged for its usual impassivity.

Camilla suddenly realised that in the recess where she was sitting she was hidden by a curtain. The invalid believed herself to be alone in the room. After reflection Camilla decided that it would be better to allow the poor soul to fulfil the quest upon which she appeared so bent. She had evidently got some notion into her mind, and to prevent her from carrying it out would merely fret and irritate her without extinguishing the desire.

She remained watching her in silence, ready to go to her assistance at the first sign of need.

But she showed no need. Laboriously, with many halts and half-suppressed moans she dragged herself along, the voluminous folds and flounces of her robe hampering her movements. Sometimes she stopped and tore fiercely at them in a feeble gust of temper. Again she would glance apprehensively at the door and shuffle on again.

Camilla rose in a hurry. Her charge had made a sudden turn toward the fireplace. But she again changed her course just as her guardian was on the point of sallying to her rescue. Soon she was feeling with a shaking hand along a narrow oaken wainscoting which skirted the room. She shuffled beside it for some distance, running her trembling fingers carefully over it.



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Then, as though she had failed to find what she sought, she retraced her way, still running the shaking fingers over the oak. So she came back to the point whence she had started. She sat up with a stupefied air. Then she broke into a sharp, exasperated cry and struck the wainscot smartly with a clenched fist. She cried out again with the pain of the blow.

Camilla had started to go to her, supposing that her quest had proved itself a baseless phantasy, not to be laid by results, when she saw that a small square of wood had sprung out from the border of oak and stood like an open door, revealing a space within. She drew again behind the curtain. Let the poor mind work out its will and find relief!

With a little maniacal cry of triumph the seeker thrust a shaking hand into the space. She felt carefully all round it. From where Camilla stood the opened door screened the interior, so that she was unable to see whether or not there was anything in it.

In another minute the invalid turned, and apparently forgetting or regardless of the secrets of the little hiding-place (for she left the door standing open) she began to shuffle back. Camilla drew again behind the curtain.

The poor face was white and weary. Great drops as of physical or mental distress beaded her brows. She moaned now without an attempt to suppress her moans. Yet there was triumph in her eyes, as though she considered her purpose fulfilled. Camilla saw by the way she now put her hand to the floor that she was holding something in it.

Presently, utterly exhausted, she sank forward upon the carpet and lay there panting helplessly. Camilla approached, soundlessly lest she might discover that she had just entered the room. She stooped and raised her quietly in her arms.

She turned her head. Her eyes filled with startled suspicion. She stared into her bearer's face. But she allowed herself to be carried back to her couch.

Having administered a restorative Camilla sponged the weary face. She strongly resisted an attempt to sponge also her clenched hand. From the couch she could not see that the door of the little secret cupboard was still standing

open. But whensoever Camilla approached it she cried and darted a hand at her.

When, later, she dropped into an exhausted doze Camilla went over to close it. She discovered a small object lying outside on the floor. In the dusk she could not distinguish what it was. Picking it up she found it to be an infant's tiny knitted shoe, a woollen morsel that had once been white but was now drab with age. A ribbon running through a circlet of spaces in the upper border showed of a pathetic faded pink. A mournful odour, part perfume, part must of years, stole out from the cupboard suggesting a secret long concealed amid a woman's clothes.

As she replaced the sad little relic she saw that the floor of the space was occupied by a large envelope, yellow-toned by age and bearing a red unbroken seal. The door closed fast with a snap and became indistinguishable from the rest of the wainscoting.

Whilst the patient was being undressed that night she suddenly cried out in distress. At the same moment a smart little clink, as of metal striking wood, was heard. Benson, bathing her hand, had succeeded by a quick manœuvre in unclenching her fingers. The prize for which she had so laboured had escaped her and in falling had struck a leg of her bedstead. She moaned and fought, her eyes gleaming with balked anger. She resisted all further ministrations until Benson searched and found the lost prize. She held it to the light. It was a small old-fashioned key with intricate wards.

"Why," she cried in amazement, "I declare if it isn't the key of the escritaire! How in the name of wonder can she have come by it? It's been missing for years."

Camilla had not mentioned the afternoon's events. She remained silent now. She had not been able to decide whether or not it was her duty to inform Sir Nigel of the cupboard and its contents, as these might be things of importance. But she was assured that they were no concern of Benson's.

When the key had been restored to her the sick woman gave a little crooning cry of contentment and allowed her undressing to proceed.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A DINNER-PARTY.

O, wonderful creature ! A woman of reason,  
Never grave out of pride, never gay out of season.

ON leaving the sick-room for the night, Camilla ran up to her bedroom to make some little toilette for supper. She was surprised to find upon her dressing-table a charming spray of flowers; a crimson rose, a tuft of orchids, with a branch of fern dropping a green cascade over all.

While she stood wondering a knock came upon her door. Mrs. Merritt entered.

"I am to tell you from Sir Nigel, Miss Braeburn," she said, "that Mrs. Sydney Drummond and her daughter, who he has just heard are relatives of yours, are dining here. Sir Nigel sends his compliments. He will be pleased if you will join his guests in the drawing-room after dinner."

She repeated her message ceremoniously, like one reading from a book. Camilla detected from her manner that she did not approve of its departure from routine.

She herself heard the invitation with dismay. Her first impulse was to decline. She had no taste for functions. She was at Pentagel wholly in a professional capacity. She felt a sudden little shyness at the thought of herself as one of Sir Nigel's guests. She suspected Cousin Caroline of being the instigator of the summons.

"Oh ! I would much rather not," she exclaimed on an impulse.

With the perversity of the feminine temperament, Mrs.

Merritt, seeing that Camilla showed no inclination to presume upon, but was, on the contrary, indisposed to take advantage of, the privilege extended to her, forthwith changed her attitude.

Such an affront to Sir Nigel was not to be thought of!

"Sir Nigel, of course, will expect you," she said firmly. "I don't really think you can refuse."

In the same moment that she had begun to speak, Camilla had realised that she must accept.

"I will go, of course," she said hastily. "It is most kind of Sir Nigel to ask me."

While she dived into her trunk for her evening-gown, Mrs. Merritt lingered.

"You had not mentioned that the Drummonds were friends of yours," she said.

"No." Camilla smiled up from among her possessions. "I only came across them by chance on Sunday. They are second cousins."

"I believe they are extremely nice people," Mrs. Merritt observed, with increased respect for the nurse. "Can I help you? I see they have brought you some flowers. I told Fleming you would be going this evening to the drawing-room."

"Thank you very much. No, my bodice fastens in front. I shall not need to trouble you."

Still she lingered, with an air of diffidence, and as though she were on the point of going. Her eyes rested on the cardboard box Camilla had taken from her trunk. "I hope the crimson rose will suit your dress," she said.

It was plain she was curious to see what manner of appearance the nurse would make amid the company. Camilla divined her wish. She quickly unfolded the gown from its layers of tissue paper.

"The rose will suit it beautifully," she said. "You see my frock is white. It is very simple. I always wear white in the evening. It suits my vocation, and, I think, it suits me," she added, with a pleased laugh.

The sight of her fresh and pretty gown, which she had never yet worn, gave her a pleasurable excitement. Her renewed health had restored her youth and spirits. She felt

a sudden little rush of happiness at the prospect of the novelty. Nesta had been right when she said that her cousin had become more human.

"It is extremely stylish," Mrs. Merritt commented, moved to approval by the sight of its crisp silken folds and lace, yet all the while retaining her original doubt as to the propriety of the nurse figuring as a guest of the house. "You wear your gowns cut low."

"Yes. One must do as Rome does."

"A nurse, I suppose, might be excused."

"It might seem like a pose," the nurse said.

Mrs. Merritt, having no pretext for lingering longer, turned to leave.

"Well, I hope you will enjoy your evening," she said cordially. At the door she stopped. "If you have not a fan," she added, with an impulse of kindness, "I will lend you a very pretty old lace one I used when I was young and went about."

Camilla, accepting with becoming gratitude: "I will bring it to the morning-room," she said.

She departed with the pleasant glow of one who overcomes a mood of envy. During her ten years' sojourn in the house no such privilege had been extended to her. Moreover, if the whole truth must be told, she was desirous of seeing the beautiful nurse as she would appear in the drawing-room. The loan of the fan would serve her for an opportunity.

Camilla dressed quickly. She wished to be already in the room when the ladies should repair thither from the dining-room. Those who go but seldom into society grow timid of it.

When she was dressed, she could not refrain from a smile of gay approval upon herself as she showed in her white gown, her classic throat and shoulders milk-white in the light of the two wax-candles at her mirror. Her beautiful hair was rolled in two burnished ripples over her Pompadour frame. It waved naturally, requiring no aid from tongs. At the back she had arranged it in a shapely coil.

She possessed no other ornament than a pearl brooch, an heirloom. Her throat was no further adorned than by that

circlet of dainty lines, which is the Hall-mark Nature sets on throats which she approves. The rose in her bouquet stood amid the laces of her bodice like a flower-heart.

Happy in her beauty, she extinguished her candles, and went down smiling to supper.

"Good gracious," Miss Hanson exclaimed. "Where *are* you going? You do look a swell."

Camilla explaining, her colleague stiffened.

"You *are* in luck," she said coldly. "It isn't every nurse who gets the chance of mixing with titled people. I can't say it's quite my idea of what is suitable, you know. My opinion is that a person should be one thing or another. Now, I always wear black when I go out in the evenings, and a high neck—black silk, of course, or satin, with elbow sleeves and frilling and a little train. I shouldn't think of wearing white, and so low as yours is in the neck, and no sleeves."

"It isn't at all low in the neck," Camilla protested indignantly, "and there are sleeves. I don't approve of much décolletage."

"Well, all I can say is, you don't look a bit like a nurse," the other insisted, with a little air of putting the whole case in a nutshell.

"I don't wish to," Camilla said shortly. She was moved to say more, but forbore.

Miss Hanson returned to the charge.

"If you like I will lend you my crucifix. I have a best one, enamelled in white, and with a silver filigree edge. I keep it for evenings and best occasions. It would make you look more like a nurse than the rose does. A red rose, too!"

Camilla laughed.

"Let me alone," she said, smiling. "It is plain we do not think alike. And I see nothing objectionable in a nurse dressing like other women when she is off duty. I don't think dress is at all a besetting sin of mine."

Her colleague shook her head. She was not willing to cede an inch of her ground. She finished her supper in a disapproving silence. She was quite prepared to make others suffer for her principles. The truth was, the poor

woman was envious, although she had not a notion of the extent to which this unamiable sentiment was responsible for her principles. Plainness demands more magnanimity of its victims than does, perhaps, any other cross the Christian woman is called upon to bear.

She regained her cheerfulness.

"Do take a little more of this delicious peach tart," she urged amicably. "I suppose they are only preserved peaches, but with cream and a little sugar, they are almost more than one can resist."

Camilla, however, had finished.

"Now, you are offended at what I said. That is foolish of you. Besides it is un-Christian. In my opinion, people might always be a little grateful for advice, even if they do not choose to take it."

"I am not at all offended," Camilla insisted. "I am sure you meant kindly."

"Well, you certainly look very nice. And the way that lace falls over on the sleeves is very pretty, and I should think must be quite the latest fashion."

Mrs. Merritt came in bringing her fan, which was a charming antique, with mother-of-pearl flanges and panels of Duchesse lace.

Camilla thanked her so sweetly and sincerely that she once again vanquished the grudgings which had sprung to her mind upon seeing the nurse in her pretty dress. Having bidden them good-night, Camilla slipped away to the drawing-room.

She was, as she had intended to be, some minutes earlier than the other guests. It was a charming room. Of its quaint and elegant Empire furnishings, each surrounded itself with an atmosphere of high-bred reserve, as though asserting an aristocratic claim to some nobler history than that of its fellows, and in consequence preserving a stately isolation among them. A fine bureau, with painted panels, which stood at the end of the room bearing two bronze candelabra filled with lighted tapers, seemed to shut its exquisitely decorated doors, and to defy a vulgar age to pry into recesses which one felt assured were crammed with noble relics, tragic and tender. Settees and lounges, more

ceremonious than cosy, were ranged against the walls, giving the aspect of an old-world salon, rather than of a modern drawing-room.

The curtains and upholstery were of brocaded satin of a delicate apple-green—a soft, sad tone, which made a sympathetic background for the tender mysteries of the historic cabinets.

Camilla remained looking about her with delight. Wax candles grouped like twinkling constellations shed a gentle radiance over everything. The old-world air of exquisite and ceremonial elegance was pleasantly diversified by a number of plants, lusty of life and luxuriant of bloom, which made rich oases of colour or of waxen white in the great room. Upon the spacious hearth a fire burned with an aspect of feeling solitary as fires will do in empty rooms. Yet to Camilla the room seemed fitly occupied. For a company of charming and distinguished persons presided with pleased serenity from the walls. Their stately clothes, their satin trains, plumed hats and jewels, above all, their fair, untroubled brows and smiling dignity of mien, together with the courtly bearing of the men, a trifle formal but punctilioously high-bred, well matched the old-world room.

Nowadays Duchesses, even Queens, show anxious fretted lines and practical shrewdnesses in their faces. In the old days *noblesse* compelled a serene and smiling dignity, no matter how sharp the heart throbs under the bodice. In those days the great lady hid her despair in a dimple. In these days blood is thinner, flesh cheaper. It no longer conceals emotional ravages. But in those days great ladies did not sell half-crown buttonholes and shilling cups of tea to young men from behind counters. They moved in an exalted seclusion, and would have died rather than dine in public restaurants.

While Camilla made delighted inspection of this treasure and of that—the great ladies and the gallants extending her a gracious welcome, the door was suddenly opened. A burst of chatter and of laughter, accompanying the ladies from the dining-room, broke the spell.

First came a tall broad-shouldered woman, with a voice and a stride like a man's. This Camilla learned was Lady

Pendaubyn. She was an enthusiastic golfer, and occupied the greater portion of her time in pursuing a small ball over a large green. Her hair was dry and grizzled, her skin rough and weather-beaten from exposure. She wore a bold and black moustache with courage. Her handsome gown of pale blue velvet dragged ill at ease upon her masculine frame. It seemed to strain ineffectually to swathe with womanly folds the sinewy limbs beneath. Her magnificent tiara and necklet of diamonds and turquoises showed oddly upon her bronzed and leathery skin. Despite an air of importance she suggested a woman in the habit of tramping beside a gipsy-cart in the acquisition of a livelihood.

After her came Mrs. Drummond, sleek, fair, admirably preserved, her pink delicacy of skin and plump roundness set off by a robe of embroidered chiffon, veiling and revealing ivory satin. Her flaxen hair, smooth and fine as silk, was elaborately dressed. In it she wore a diamond lyre and an ostrich plume, which lent her dignity and height.

She walked buoyantly, with the undulancy of those who walk little.

Gwendolen Treherne and Nesta followed, linking arms. They were making those spasmodic, rather stilted, advances toward friendship covered by shy retreats and silences, which one sees between girls who have little in common.

Nesta, in a frock of white chiffon and lace, was a dream of girlish loveliness. Her dead-leaf hair, gathered from her slender neck in a Psyche knot, was crowned by a wreath of tiny starlike flowers. She looked like Titania gowned by Paquin.

Beside her Miss Treherne, who was really a pretty and graceful girl, full of impulsive spirits, ingenuous and warm-hearted, showed to disadvantage. Her very ordinary pink silk frock looked provincial and fussy by contrast with the skilful lines of Paquin.

Mrs. Drummond, who could not distinguish a "driver" from a "putter," and who regarded exercise as a disagreeable daily obligation upon the altar of health and complexion, had been anticipating a bored quarter of an hour with Lady Pendaubyn. Her brain was already bewildered by "bogeyeys" and "stymies" and "two-ups" and "three-to-wins"

—terms which were as Greek to her. Then her eye lighted upon Camilla.

She sailed to meet her, her plump gloved hands extended like two wings, delight in her face.

"Now this is nice," she cried. "Sir Nigel did not say a word. I just mentioned you, hoping I might be allowed to run up and see you. I never hoped for this."

She introduced her to Lady Pendaubyn and to Miss Treherne. Lady Pendaubyn received her cordially. But her mind was so occupied by the day's achievements that she had no notion who she was.

"Are you making a long visit to our part of the world?" she inquired. She did not await the answer.

"I hope you play golf. But, of course, you do. Now-a-days everybody does. I have Meg McGregor stopping with me for a week. The champion, you know! You have not seen her play? Good heavens! I thought everybody had seen her play. Meg McGregor, of North Berwick, you know. Her 'drive' is a miracle. She looks for all the world like a corkscrew. But the ball fairly sings, and she can drive farther than most men. It's only a knack. You've got to get a particular twist into your legs. I'm worming it out of her."

She laughed—a loud and rollicking laugh. Her tiara seemed to flash indignant protest from a hundred blazing eyes at being made to preside above so unrestrained an utterance.

"Bring up your cousin some day to lunch," she enjoined Mrs. Drummond. "We'll make up a foursome. I forget if you play. No? Oh, of course not. I remember now you told me before. You didn't play last year, I know. But the ranks are continually getting recruits. Bring Nesta, then. She plays a very good game. Beat me last year by two holes up and two to play, I recollect."

"Do you still only 'put'?" Nesta inquired of Gwendolen, breaking a silence, during which Gwendolen had been casting admiring and rather rueful glances upon the beauty beside which she felt herself to be sadly in the shade.

Gwendolen smiled.

"I still only 'put,'" she said. "I like to enjoy myself.



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And I find I can't enjoy other things when I'm tired with golf. It makes me feel cross and snappy. And I don't like to feel cross."

"I don't get cross," Nesta returned calmly—"when I ~~wan~~. And I have had to get into the habit of not noticing when I am tired. We go about so much, you know, and do so much."

"I know you do," Gwendolen said, looking up to her with not a little awe. She was leaning against a carven column of the oaken fireplace, her long limbs in a statuesque and studied pose. The dark wood threw up her sea-shell delicacy. She opened and closed her ostrich feather fan with a languorous grace. Her air was one of disdain, almost of arrogance. It was not merely that virginal curve of lip which gives girls an appearance of disdaining the unworthy. It was rather a species of emotional boredom, which moved her to despise a world of people who attempted and failed to interest her.

She did not suspect that the fault might be in herself.

Gwendolen always felt herself to be a cypher in her presence. She became stirred by misgivings lest it was merely provincial on her part to be pleased as she was pleased with common everyday things. Nesta chilled her, nipping her spontaneity and lively impulses, making her feel flat and stupid. She found little to say. They had known one another for years, yet when they met after a separation it seemed always as though they had only just been introduced.

"I heard you were in the theatricals the other day at Liverpool House," Gwendolen said. "Did you not feel nervous at acting before the King and Queen?"

"Oh, no. I knew my part. The King complimented me afterwards. It all went excellently. I got an encore for my skirt-dance. Do you see! The Queen gave me this little brooch."

She unfastened a small pearl and ruby clasp from her bodice, and held it toward the other. She did not move. She expected that Gwendolen would rise and go for it.

Gwendolen did so, good-humouredly, and with an air of receiving a favour.

"How sweet of her," she said, taking it reverently into a hand. "I wonder you dare to wear it. You might lose it."

"The pin is firm, and it isn't really very valuable. Oh," she added, "you mean because the Queen gave it. Well, when you come to know them they are quite simple in their ways—the Royal Family. They're not nearly so smart as numbers of other persons in society."

"It is very delightful of them," Gwendolen maintained sturdily. "It is the best possible breeding and form."

"Oh, perhaps," Nesta admitted airily. But it was evident that she set "smartness" at a higher value.

She turned her head and launched from beneath her gold-flecked lashes a scandalised glance toward Lady Pendaubyn. Relating some story which had demanded a drop in her voice and the approximation of heads lest the ears of young persons should suffer, she had broken as its point was reached into a burst of boisterous laughter.

Nesta's glance compared the laugher with her mother. She also was laughing, but with a controlled and modulated ripple, accompanied by a slightly deprecative raising of the brows, as though her fastidiousness and her sense of humour struggled.

Nesta's face displayed a sense of gratitude that fate had had the discretion to provide her with the more becoming chaperone.

Camilla sat grave, her beautiful eyes drooped. Her work had revealed motherhood to her as a wonderful and sacred mystery. It hurt her to find a woman of breeding, herself the mother of children, making a jest of a great marvel.

"Now, you are shocked," Lady Pendaubyn cried, shaking a bronzed, large finger at her.

"Oh, not at all," she disclaimed civilly. "But being a nurse one regards things so differently."

"My cousin has taken up nursing," Mrs. Drummond explained. She accompanied the explanation by so elegant a sweep of a hand that her cousin's penchant was at once upraised beyond the sphere of vulgar necessity.

Lady Pendaubyn's face set. She glanced at Camilla curiously. A film of disapproval froze her features.



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"I have always thought nursing must bring one into relation with so many—indelicacies," she suggested primly.

"No," Camilla maintained, "only with the workings of Nature."

"Isn't it rather the same thing? At all events I could never have done it." She shook her large head. "But all people are not so sensitive."

"The odd thing," Mrs. Drummond commented impressively, "is that she likes it."

Lady Pendaubyn had an inspiration. In the glow of it she melted. She set a cordial, muscular grip upon Camilla's wrist.

"Try golf," she said. "It's all out-doors and far more amusin'."

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## CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

Sweet-and-twenty.

BASS notes swelled in approach. There was the faintest flutter of skirts as the ladies set finishing touches to their demeanour. As one sees immediately before the rising of a curtain on a tableau or before the uncapping of a photographic camera they smoothed the expression out of their faces and smiled.

Only Nesta, standing tall and slender at the fireplace in the light of a cluster of candles, made no change. She retained the pose she had already taken, charming and not to be improved upon. Without turning her head she continued to fold and unfold her fan with a languorous grace.

The door was thrown open. A wave of force, of assertiveness, of conflicting wills, swept into the room and, blending at once with the feminine influences it found there, became a harmony.

As an arrow from a bow Arthur Colville, slim and handsome in his dress clothes, made for the fireplace. With scarcely a glance toward Gwendolen, with whom he had by this time come to be on very friendly terms, he took up his place, eager and admiring, beside Nesta. Whereupon Gwen with a great show of interest buried herself in a book of pictures. Lord Boisragon lounged heavily, glancing about him at the pictures and other art works as he went, to the group composed by Lady Pendaubyn, Mrs. Drummond and Camilla.

He began to talk to Lady Pendaubyn, his eyes upon Camilla. Then Sir Nigel appeared bringing up Mr. Treherne, who, on entering, had loitered at the end of the room and, with a feint of admiring a handsome Empire Atlas clock, had made a deliberate survey of the company in order to decide at leisure on his course of action. His decision had apparently been an introduction to Camilla, for, after a word to Sir Nigel, the latter was seen with him in tow making for her chair.

Sir Nigel's looks dwelled for a moment upon her:

"I am pleased you were able to come," he said, and shook hands with her. He introduced Mr. Treherne.

"You were not at dinner," the latter submitted, staring down upon her from his six feet elevation.

"No," she said.

He paused as though for the explanation. She felt that it would be *gauche* to continue explaining herself. She did not do so.

He began to talk about the pictures. His eyes seemed filled with astonishment at rather than with approval of her looks. Owing to their prominence, however, their stare, and his naturally raised brows, surprise was his habitual expression.

Now and again he glanced toward Arthur and Nesta, who were engaged in animated talk. Once, as though accompanying his thought, his eyes travelled from them to Gwendolen smiling above her book of pictures.

Sir Nigel, seeing her alone, drew a chair beside her.

"A little bird tells me," he said, "that you are going to win the Archery Tournament."

She shook her head.

"I am afraid it was a wicked little story-telling bird," she answered. Her eyes filled with fun. But her smile was rather dispirited. She had just seen Arthur bending over Nesta's slender hand. She guessed that Nesta was showing him the Queen's brooch. He had an air of being greatly impressed.

"But I insist upon you winning," Sir Nigel rallied her. "To tell the truth I have chosen for first prize something that would do for nobody but you."

"Can there be such a thing?" She showed pleased and mystified.

"Win and you shall see."

"But if I do not win, and if it will do only for me, how shall you dispose of it?"

"I must keep it for some other occasion on which you will win."

"Then whether I win or lose the Archery Tournament it will still be mine."

He smiled.

"You are too smart," he said. "I can only put you on your honour."

"Then I will do my very best," she cried impulsively.

He turned a page of the book she was holding. "Now, tell me, what do you think of these Victorian ladies with their sidecurls and shoulders?"

He looked with expectant mischief into her face. He prepared to be amused by the avalanche of scorn she forthwith hurled upon them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is Lord Pendaubyn down?" Lord Boisragon inquired of Pendaubyn's spouse. "I passed him yesterday driving."

"He was on his way to town," his spouse returned. She broke into her characteristic laughter. "Whenever he is seen down here he is always on his way from or back to town. He has no rustic tastes. But he cannot get me to go with him. He tells people he is a golf-grass widower, whose wife has eloped with a cleek. He has heard me speak of a cleek. In reality he wouldn't know it from a croquet mallet."

"Ah," Lord Boisragon said in his absent fashion, "you play golf then?"

"Do I breathe," she retorted with a massive archness.

His friends said of him that he lacked humour.

"Breathe," he echoed, dragging his heavy eyes back out of abstraction. "Play golf!" He jerked up his shoulders as though to brace his mind to leap the connection. He glanced helplessly into her bronzed face. Then, seeing that some thrust of humour had been intended, he responded as he thought was expected of him.

"Play golf! Ha! ha! Breathe! Ha! ha!" He



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laughed with a dismal simulation of mirth. "Very funny! extraordinarily funny! Ha! ha!"

Then he turned and edged heavily away from her. He seated himself on the other side of Mrs. Drummond. She had too much tact, he had discovered, to make jokes without explaining them.

She laid a plump delicate glove upon his arm. She looked with flattering eyes into his pale large face. It was creased with deep and melancholy lines.

"Nesta and I are always talking," she told him in her pleasant voice, "of our delightful voyage from Egypt. You and Mr. Arthur made us quite forget we were on the sea—a trial generally to both of us."

His heavy countenance lighted. He smiled faintly. His rough life in the wilds had shattered his nerves. Lady Pendaubyn's energy set them on edge. Mrs. Drummond's tranquillizing aura soothed and calmed them.

"The privilege was ours," he said with sincerity. "After our rough life you and Miss Nesta gave us our first taste for civilisation."

They embarked at once upon a pleasant voyage of talk; steamer reminiscences, flittings from port to port, skimming deeps and plashing amid pleasant shallows, all their goings sunned by the lady's southern atmosphere, fanned by her sympathetic tones.

"She means to marry him," Lady Pendaubyn decided, observing them. She was mistaken. Mrs. Drummond valued her congenial widowhood with its comfortable circumstances and comparative freedom from responsibility far too highly to be willing to relinquish it. But she possessed a talent for being agreeable as another may for painting or for singing. And she enjoyed exerting it, irrespective of results. In the present case she had an end in view. But it was not that which Lady Pendaubyn suspected:

With tactful urbanity she drew Lady Pendaubyn every now and again into the conversation, so flattering her with the impression that she was necessary to it, and pleasantly relieving Lord Boisragon of further responsibility to his most important neighbour's wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks awfully! So good of you, I'm sure, to make me such a topping present," Arthur Colville teased Nesta. He assumed the air of a languid man of fashion. He took the Queen's gift out of her hand, and deposited it impressively in a vest pocket. A girlish flush rose to his cheeks. A sparkle, part fun, part apprehension at his boldness, which glanced from his dark eyes betrayed his inexperience and actual shyness. No doubt he expected an indignant outcry, an impulsive snatching at the purloined treasure, scolding, laughter, dismay, perhaps tears.

But Nesta was not Gwen. She saw with calm and confident eyes the temporary disappearance of her prize. Her experience read his inexperience as she would have read an infant's primer.

"As you are a good boy," she returned, with an air of superiority, "you may keep it in your pocket for just five minutes by the clock."

She glanced to the girdle of hours encircling the globe which Atlas bore on his bent shoulders.

She caressed her sea-shell cheek with an expert and self-conscious coquetry. The sight of its beautiful curve, in relief against her Psyche knot of dead leaf hair, set the youth's young blood tingling through every limb with a new sense. In the light of her indifference he saw his action childish rather than as he had intended a master stroke of manly assurance. But he summoned his resources. Not a whit of his presumption would he cede. He withdrew the brooch from his pocket. He held it toward her. In the tone of one addressing a petulant child:

"There then, she shall have it," he said soothingly. "We must not set her to cry before company. And if she doesn't cry, though I see the tears in her eyes, she shall have the best box of chocolates London can supply."

Gwendolen seeing him at the moment thought he looked splendidly manly and handsome, her ideal of a young nobleman.

Even Nesta, glancing from beneath her long lashes, acknowledged that he carried off the situation creditably.

"Now, I have forgotten where it should go," she said in-



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genuously. "Do you think you could pin it for me? It came from somewhere about this bow on the shoulder."

She bent to him. The perfume of the flowers in her bodice swept to him. The flowers in her hair pulsated tremulously like stars beneath his eyes. Her delicate flesh rose and fell to her breathing.

He was seized with a sudden tumult. His hands trembled. He was sure he would make a fool of himself. How could he pin the brooch when his hands shook like a fool's?

Yet had his life depended on it he would have tried. And if fate so willed he would have died in the attempt. She intoxicated his brain. He had never seen anyone so beautiful. How should he dare to touch her? She seemed too wonderful to touch. He suddenly steadied his nerves. Bending to her, with one quick movement he clasped the brooch in a fold of the bow. He did not know nor did anyone see that he had closed his eyes, all at once timid and reverent of the bare snowball shoulder so near to his hand. He drew back some paces, breathing fast and furiously. A number of breaths seemed to have accumulated in his chest for those two he had held while he pinned the brooch. For he had been afraid lest by any chance he should breathe upon her.

Why does the world value a young man's purity, with its quick and uplifting emotions, less than a girl's?

He stooped and stirred the fire. It was necessary to rid himself of embarrassment before he should again meet her eyes.

"It's jolly cold to-night," he said, a little roughness in his voice, his face bent over the grate. In reality he felt his blood at boiling heat.

She watched him with calm eyes. She knew he had been afraid of her. It flattered her to know it. At the same time it was unintelligible to her. She did not feel in the least like a divinity. She had not realised the reverence of shyness, but she realised that he greatly admired her. Perhaps he had darted back to escape an impulse to kiss her shoulder. The married man who had asked her to elope with him had once kissed her shoulder when she was sitting out a dance with him in the garden. It seemed to her rather absurd that men should have such impulses. She was not

herself subject to emotional impulses. But she liked to be the object of them and to read admiration of her beauty in men's eyes and voices. They repaid her for the trouble she took to dress and to please. Moreover, she realised them as the means to a good marriage.

The coming season would be her third. During it she must find her *parti*. If no better offered Arthur Colville would do. He was not rich. But it was a fine old name and family.

Arthur from the other side of the mantelpiece, talking fast and irrelevantly, was inwardly thanking heaven that his outdoor existence on a lonely ranche, aided by his father's jealous precautions to preserve him from entanglement, had left him with an unsullied life. If he had felt, as he felt himself, unworthy to approach her, how would it have been with him had his record been smirched?

In the moment of meeting her again that evening all the philosophies and worldly wisdoms, inculcated by his father, had toppled like a house of cards.

On the steamer he had felt himself too hard put to it in holding his own against the embarrassing novelties of social life to realise her as anything more than a bewilderingly pretty girl. By this time, although he was still shy, the amenities were taking up their normal position among the instincts, leaving faculties free for more interesting and pleasing occupation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you find this house close?" Lord Boisragon inquired suddenly of Mrs. Drummond. He drew his handkerchief with an air of languor across his loose lips. He rose and remained standing, as though change of position lightened some oppression.

She looked surprised.

"It isn't close," she insisted. "On the contrary I find it delightfully fresh. Perhaps the scent of the flowers is too strong for you. It affects some persons, I know."

He shook his head. "I never notice them. There is something odd about the house, I noticed it the minute I came in. Then a confounded owl screeched—close beside



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one's ears it seemed—just as we got into the drive. I hate owls. They give me nerves."

She leaned toward him with an air of concern.

"You look quite pale," she said. She noticed how his hand on the back of a chair shook convulsively. His heavy eyes, with their look of abstraction, rolled restlessly.

"Ask for wine," she counselled.

"No." He laughed curtly. "I took more than my doctor would approve at dinner."

A diversion was caused by Nesta being invited to sing. Her voice was small and rather thin, but it had been exquisitely trained. She sang a little snatch of melody about "love and pain" and "mist and rain" with charming expression. Her mother played her accompaniment. The song was so short that another was at once demanded. While she sang she drooped and flashed her eyes. Her lips curved and parted upon her white teeth with captivating guile.

Arthur stared at her with his heart in his dark eyes. One might have believed he saw moons and stars emerging from between her lovely lips.

Then the guests redistributed themselves. Sir Nigel engaged Lady Pendaubyn, Camilla deserted Mr. Treherne and his monotonous probing talk, which seemed all the while to be prosecuting insidious inquiries. She joined Mrs. Drummond. Lord Boisragon, presently drifting to them, was introduced to her.

Arthur followed Nesta from the piano. But when he would have seated himself beside her, with a smile of coquetry she bade him go to Gwen. Her smile said "Stay." But he did not read it aright. With a hurt look he proceeded to obey her.

Gwen however vouchsafed him such short answers out of the book to which she had returned that he presently left her. He withdrew sulkily to a far corner of the room, whence he watched his charmer with an air of profound injury.

Mr. Treherne took up his stand beside Nesta. She received him with that exceeding show of animation, that charming play of feature which a wise man recognises as directed against some other person in the room.

Camilla, leaving the conversation to Lord Boisragon and

her cousin, sat looking about her in a dream of pleasure. Her looks strayed to Sir Nigel. She marked his air of distinction, his courtly self-effacement in ministering to his guests, above all, his talent of diffusing a sympathetic charming gaiety. She thought his manner showed a fine fortitude in view of that lamentable chamber in his life from which only a few walls separated him.

He moved from one to another of the groups interposing a remark witty or in some way stimulative. His own intense vitality had the effect of quickening interest and spirits. He recalled Arthur sulking in his corner back to his duties and to Gwendolen. With amiable railery he teased them once again into cordiality. He left them in a lively quarrel.

Presently he came to a halt beside Camilla. He took a chair near her.

"It will be pleasant for you to have your cousins at Gweal Court," he said. "I hope you have not felt isolated. Camelcarbis is somewhat at the end of the world."

She told him she was interested in her work. She told him how the beautiful grounds and neighbourhood were a novelty and had come to be a delight to her. He recalled what she had once confessed to him.

"And when you came you preferred London?" he said with a smile of irony.

"Now, I cannot understand it."

He shook his head.

"It was an example of taste corrupted by evil environment. And Shingle Bay is a favourite spot?"

She wondered how he knew. She remembered Mrs. Merritt had told her he knew everything.

"Do you not admire it?" she asked. "It is like a speaking solitude."

He sent her a quick observant look, as though her words had given him a clue to her.

"Oh, I am incapable of judging. Where Camelcarbis is concerned I am a fanatic."

Presently he rose.

"Please see your cousins as often as you wish," he said. "Mrs. Merritt can always find a substitute." His face fell. "I fear it is a sad life for you," he added. He seemed to



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feel her youth and beauty. He did not hear her when she thanked him.

Carriages were soon announced and the party broke up.

Whilst Arthur in a seventh heaven was handing the Drummonds to their carriage :

"Who is your dark-haired beauty with the Clytie bust?" Lord Boisragon demanded of Sir Nigel in an undertone as they stood together in the hall. His heavy eyes glittered with momentary interest. He was wrapping a thick silk muffler with care about his throat.

"I feel the night air," he said. "I'm not the man I was. But who is the beauty? Is she stopping in the house?"

"She is one of my wife's nurses," Sir Nigel explained, "a cousin of the Drummonds. I thought they would like to meet her."

"Gad! A nurse! Harland, things have changed since we were young. Mrs. Gamp nursed in those days."

He darted a gleam from beneath his heavy lids. "Isn't it rather a temptation of St. Anthony—having such a charmer under your roof?"

"Really, I haven't considered her in that light," Sir Nigel returned gravely.

"No. Well, I always find women the very deuce, you know."

"They—or yourself?"

He laughed—a deep rough laugh.

"A bit of both perhaps."

"Who is Miss Braeburn?" Mr. Treherne consulted Gwen as they drove home.

"She is one of Lady Harland's nurses, Dad."

He raised his brows.

"Odd of Harland to have in one of his wife's nurses. Pretty woman though! But she hadn't much to say for herself."

"It wasn't at all odd," Gwen insisted, rousing herself out of her thoughts. "She is a cousin of the Drummonds, and it was like Sir Nigel to pay them the compliment of meeting her."

"Cousin of the Drummonds, was she? Oh, I hadn't gathered that," Mr. Treherne said.



## CHAPTER XXII.

## GOSSIP.

To see her is to love her  
And love but her for ever ;  
For Nature made her what she is,  
And ne'er made sic anither !

CAMILLA next morning at breakfast was obliged to recount every detail of the evening to Miss Hanson. She listened breathlessly and open-mouthed.

"I suppose you will always be invited in to dinner when people come," she said.

"Oh, of course not," Camilla protested. "I was asked last night out of compliment to Mrs. Drummond."

"Well, I must say you looked very well. Paget, the butler, told Benson he thought when he took in tea—that there wasn't a pin to choose between you and Miss Drummond. For his part he thought he'd have chosen you. Rogers, the second footman, preferred Miss Drummond."

Camilla laughed.

"I am much obliged to Paget," she returned amused.

"Well, there's no occasion to be so high and mighty," the other said huffily. "It must be nice to have people quarrelling about your appearance."

Mrs. Merritt came in before the nurses went upstairs. She brought Miss Hanson a new variety of biscuit. She thought it would appeal to Cicero's palate. Perhaps, also, she wished to hear a little gossip of the previous evening. Camilla told her interesting scraps.

Miss Hanson forgot her huff. She accompanied Camilla upstairs, talking amicably. She carried the new biscuit and half an egg she had reserved from breakfast for her pet.

"I am trying to teach him, 'Trust and paid for,'" she said. "But he really is so greedy he gobbles it up almost before I've had time to say 'Trust.'" She laughed delightedly. "I was nearly two whole hours yesterday drilling him. I believe he pretends not to understand just to save himself the bother of doing things. He is so cunning and amusing. How *do* you live without anything to interest you?"

Sir Nigel bade Camilla "Good-morning," with his accustomed gravity. There was, perhaps, a shade more warmth and interest in his greeting. Once he looked up from his letters, to glance down the room to where she sat with drooped eyes over her work. There lurked a little wicked smile upon his lips. Perhaps he was thinking of what Boisragon had said.

The invalid had insisted upon retaining the key of the *escriaire*. Its possession seemed to tranquillise her. She was quieter than she had been for months. She would scarcely relinquish it even while her toilette was made. If in her unhinged mind there had been a project for employing it this seemed now to be forgotten. She would lie jealously staring at it in her opened palm as though its mere possession were a source of satisfaction. If she found herself observed, she immediately closed the hand sharply and dropped her lids.

Camilla had decided to say nothing of the wainscot cupboard and its contents. Let the poor soul keep her secret! After all the years during which it had been kept, no object could now be served by its disclosure.

From her bed the invalid could not see the *escriaire*, but one morning the housemaids had not arrived to sweep and dust her room until after she had been dressed and carried to her couch. She turned suddenly to discover one of the women engaged in polishing an inlaid door. She began to cry distressedly, darting her hands angrily and forbiddingly at her. She did not cease her lamentation until Camilla, suspecting the cause, bade the woman quit her task. The

lamentations ceased immediately. It was clear that some source of perturbation to her distraught mind lay hidden in the *escritaire*.

One afternoon she wailed incessantly, went even to the length of shedding a few tears, a weakness Camilla had only once known in her. She looked at the key in her hand. She looked with a helpless bewilderment at the cabinet. She appeared to realise a vague connection between them. Camilla, at last in compassion, raised her gently and carried her over to the bureau.

In a moment the hand with the key shot forward and helplessly fumbled about the keyhole. Another moment and she had turned her head. She stared Camilla suspiciously in the face. A gleam of cunning darted into her eyes. She dropped her hand. She snapped down her lids. She let herself sink, an impassive heap, in her bearer's arms. Nothing Camilla could do or say would rouse her. She carried her back to the couch.

Another day, when she seemed distressed, Camilla again carried her over to the cabinet. But she would not even raise the hand that held the key. She remained with a malicious twist upon her face, glaring suspiciously at her bearer. She showed the spiteful triumph of one who outwits another.

"I don't believe there's anything at all in the *escritaire*," Benson said. "She needn't hug the key so. To the best of my belief it was all emptied out, and she burned everything just before she was taken ill."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Drummonds were leaving for London. Camilla walked over one afternoon to bid them good-bye. She found Arthur Colville there. Lord Boisragon and he were also going to town for the season. Camilla thought the young man seemed bewitched. There was a species of ecstatic exultation about him, however, as though he felt hopeful of his chances. He and Nesta sat apart in a window recess of the long drawing-room, talking in low tones. On the table lay a magnificent bouquet of flowers, beside it an elaborate casket of chocolates, which bore a well-known Parisian name.



## GOSSIP.

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Nesta was looking charming. Her short sojourn at the sea had lured the loveliest faint colour to her cheeks. Mrs. Drummond and Camilla remained chatting at the lower end of the room. Mrs. Drummond sent occasional pleased glances at the young couple. She smiled frequently. Camilla had seldom seen her in more gracious mood.

"We go to town on Monday," she said. "I am almost sorry to be leaving. We have had such a very pleasant time here. But I want Nesta to get a nice long season."

"Mr. Colville will miss you, I imagine," Camilla said, with a little significant glance.

"Not for long. They come up the following week, and no doubt we shall see a good deal of them."

"He appears to have quite lost his heart. What a handsome and nice young man he seems."

"He is most ingenuous. As fresh and full of enthusiasm as a boy. But Nesta must not decide too soon. She is looking very pretty, and is sure to be much admired. I can leave her little more than two thousand a year. And the Boisragons are poor. The place needs money."

"It is a pity to calculate these things. He seems so fond of her."

"There is generally cause for greater pity," Mrs. Drummond asserted decisively, "when these things are not calculated."

"Lord Boisragon is an odd man," she resumed. "I cannot make him out. Did you hear—but, of course, you would not—of the little scene he made the other night at Pentagel during dinner. He looked pale and stared about him restlessly, not seeming to see things, and when the butler came in and spoke to him in an undertone he started up and called out wildly, 'I can't see her. I won't see her. Tell her to go away!' It seems some woman had come to the house and had sent in a message asking him to see her for a moment. It transpired that her husband had met with an accident. He was one of Lord Boisragon's keepers. She wanted to know what his Lordship was prepared to do for the man. Lord Boisragon plainly mistook her for somebody else. He was in a dreadful state of agitation. I really thought he would have had a fit. Arthur

was sorely put out. When at last he was made to understand, he apologised. He was quite ashamed. He laughed nervously. He said he was not well. Something had startled him and shaken his nerves when he was driving to Pentagel. But the whole thing was so odd. What woman could he have supposed it was? It quite upset us, and took all Sir Nigel's tact and cleverness to restore the table to spirits."

Camilla having no suggestion to offer, Cousin Caroline turned all at once upon her:

"Camilla, have you heard any talk?" she demanded. "Now, no scruples! If you have heard anything it is your duty to tell me. I can't have Nesta's prospects spoiled. I have been told nobody knows anything about Arthur's mother. There is talk of a bar sinister. You understand! That Lord Boisragon has probably never been married at all. Not intending to return to England, and never remotely supposing he had a chance of succeeding, he is said to have flung conventions to the wind. Most reprehensible, of course, if true. But he is a strange man. It occurred to me the other evening that his dread was lest the woman, Arthur's mother, you know, should have followed him over. I mean—supposing there is any truth in the report."

Camilla told her what she had heard from Nurse Hanson —mere irresponsible gossip.

"There may, of course, be nothing in it. But, of course, for Nesta's sake, I must have everything cleared up. I have heard that Maynard Colville, the cousin, you know, has every intention, at Lord Boisragon's death, of asserting his claim on the ground of Arthur's illegitimacy."

"Oh, poor young man! Do you think he knows?"

"I am sure he hasn't a suspicion. Indeed, he has said one or two things that show he himself is eager to learn something of his mother. He believes she died while he was an infant. So far as is known, he has no brothers or sisters. It's an odd affair. Ah, here is tea! Nesta, bring Mr. Arthur here for some tea. One might think I had banished you to see the way you sit in that remote corner."

A ripple of laughter rose out of the corner, then whispers and silence.



Soon Arthur appeared, tall and ceremonious, advancing with a concerned face, though the corners of his mouth twitched mischievously.

"Please, Mrs. Drummond," he said, with a little drawl. "It is quite a situation. Miss Nesta's foot has gone to sleep from sitting so long in the 'remote corner.' She can't wake it, you know. She sends her apologies to you and Miss Braeburn," he bowed to Camilla, "and if you will excuse her——"

"Does she mean that she prefers to drink her tea in the 'remote corner'—alone?" Mrs. Drummond demanded, smiling indulgently upon him.

"She didn't say 'alone.'" The twitch at the corners of his mouth spread. "So I thought if you would be good enough to excuse me and allow me to console her solitude—under the distressing circumstances——" He could maintain his gravity no longer. He broke into a boyish laugh.

"You are a couple of naughty children," his hostess cried. "I suppose, however, I must humour you." She poured two cups of tea for them, and when Arthur had punctiliously passed their tea to the other ladies, and had supplied them with *foie gras* sandwiches, he carried the cups to the remote corner. He came back for muffins and for the casket of chocolates. The whispers and laughter buzzed gaily. Presently he appeared again approaching, shyly self-conscious

"Get me a cake heart," Nesta called softly.

Camilla saw the blood rush to his face. The dish he took trembled. He returned and stood before her with it. He appeared to forget that they were not alone in the room.

"Cake hearts for real ones," he said in a young, thrilling voice. Nesta was hidden in the recess, only her knees and skirts showing from where Camilla sat. But she saw a pink hand pass out, and, with a delicate flirt of fingers, remain poised for a moment like a fluttering moth above the dish. She selected one.

"Only a cake heart for a real one," she protested banteringly. "It isn't a fair exchange. What shall I have left when my cake heart is eaten?"

"Another real one," he said, "bigger than the one you

gave, stronger"—his voice shook and dropped to a whisper—"fonder—"

Camilla saw the girl's long slender limbs gather themselves together. She rose and carelessly shook out her skirts:

"Come," she said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "It is time we remembered the civilities."

While the little play had been enacted, Mrs. Drummond and Camilla had continued to talk, Mrs. Drummond recounting her plans, and describing some of the gowns in preparation for Nesta's season. Both had heard all that was said, and each was aware that the other had heard. Mrs. Drummond was smiling slightly upon her reflections while she talked.

Immediately after Arthur had made his last speech, a little apprehension came into her face. She broke off in the middle of a sentence.

Nesta's sudden rising and approach were an obvious relief. She concluded her sentence and supplemented it by confiding to her cousin in a hasty undertone as the pair advanced: "Nesta is so clever. I can always trust her. And she is expecting great things from her season in town."

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

## THE DRAGON'S MOUTH.

He who knows what sweets and virtues are in the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come at these enchantments is a rich and royal man.

It was June. Camelcarbis was deserted. All the persons it is customary to regard as composing the world were in town.

The Drummonds had departed two months since; Lord Boisragon and Arthur nearly as long. The Treherne's and Sir Nigel had gone up the second week in April. Even Lady Pendaubyn had torn herself, with pangs and vociferous complainings, from her cleek, and had carried her three plain athletic daughters to the less active joys of Vanity Fair.

And all the while in Nature's Fair (which is not vain, but grandly earnest), there had occurred a succession of lovely marvels, irrespective wholly of the comings and goings of persons of consequence. March had brought the almond bloom, which all of a sudden fleshed the earth and perfumed the air with a pink host of miracles.

April had sent sunshine and snow showers, smiles and tears, moods grey and golden, gravity and witchery, chill airs, languorous airs, warm airs and odours. The trees had shaken out their new green frocks, a little creased and crumpled from their winter storing. Afterwards had come the apple-blossom, bourgeoning the boughs and bespangling the skies with a glory of blood-flecked creamy petals, for all

the world like rich incarnate kisses. And the cherry trees had donned their veils of whiteness, to stand like palpitant maiden brides.

Even the sea waxed warm and calm and amorous, the great rollers advancing landward in a bold majestic marriage march, to fling themselves upon the shore in fierce embracings.

Camilla watched the wonders with a sense of divine revelation. The gardens of Pentagel were an ever-changing pageant. Colour vied in tender tournament with colour, perfume with perfume. Variety succeeded upon variety with bewildering haste.

From their winter storehouses, the tall geranium plants were brought and bedded. The brown stems soon sprang into life, mantling the house with a thicket of green leaves and rose-pink blossoms.

With the March winds Lady Harland had ailed a little. She was more peevish and troublesome than usual and her nurses' hands had been full. As the air grew warm and sunned, however, she rallied, and Camilla once again had leisure to enjoy the novelty of spring in the country.

She was glad when Sir Nigel returned to Pentagel. During his absence the household had become phlegmatic, life a perfunctory routine. With his return interest and spirits quickened.

He looked fatigued and rather bored, Camilla thought, as he resumed his post beside the invalid on the morning following upon his home-coming. She vouchsafed him no welcome. She showed no other sign of noticing his reappearance than by becoming more amenable.

During his absence she had made the lives of all about her well-nigh intolerable.

He greeted Camilla cordially. His eyes filled with pleasure as they shook hands.

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Some afternoons later on taking her place in the carriage she bade the coachman drive to Shingle Bay. The morning had been close and hot, more like an August than a July day. She experienced a longing for the solitude and freshness of her favourite haunt.



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She sat for a time enjoying the breeze. Then she re-climbed the beach.

"Please take the carriage back," she told the coachman. "I will walk home along the sand. They say it is a beautiful walk."

He touched his hat respectfully. "It's dangerous, ma'am," he objected, "to anyone who doesn't know the coast. There's coves and points where a person may get caught by the tide. It's turned some time."

"I will take care. The tide is still some distance out. I shall walk quickly."

"Well," he said with reluctance, "as you please, of course, ma'am. But you must mind and not on any account get into the Dragon's Mouth. You'll see the steps cut in the slope when you come to the Peak. That will lead you up on to the Pentagel road."

She thanked him and hastened away. She descended the shingle steeps, making for the plain of sand within the horns of the Bay. From the sand plain, the sea looked no more than a far-away blue border. It took her some time to work round the western horn. It stretched farther seaward than she had supposed. But the sand made pleasant going, as level and almost as smooth as asphalte, but, unlike asphalte, yielding to the feet. A breeze, cool and salt-charged, blew from the sea.

Reaching the point of the horn, she was able to see for herself the phenomenon the Bay afforded. The fawn-brown mass of shingle made an almost complete crescent within two arms of rock. On the other side of the point the shore was rocky, irregular in outline, in parts low and smooth and sinuous, in others rising steeply and sending spines, rugged and tapering, into the sand. Rocks, shaggy and maned with brown weed, showed like a herd of grazing hairy monsters spread about the plain. Some stood in pools as though cooling their feet, the hollows containing the pools having in reality resulted from the swirl of waters round their bases. In the pools, small natural aquaria, pellucid and still, she saw numbers of anemones floating their brown and pink pennons with airs of gentle pride. At the sound of her approach crabs of some size burrowed their stealthy ugly

bodies sidelong into the sand. They remained there half-buried and motionless, their claws girt for action, their horny eyes protruding and canting askew.

The rocks appeared to brood above the small aquaria with a possessive air. There was something almost fierce in their strong salt hirsute smell.

In parts the surface was grooved into shallow wrinkles which, according to the curves taken, impressed a pleasant or a scowling aspect upon the face of the sand.

She kept in mind the coachman's warning. Despite the attractions and temptations of the way, she walked briskly on, stopping only for minutes to poke an exploring finger amid the wonders of the pools. As she went, she saw that the shore was rising higher and higher, becoming steep in parts and overhanging. She kept well out toward the sea, taking the shortest route to a rocky promontory which stretched before her.

From the distance she could see that the rocks were hollowed into caverns. Their mouths showed black and wide, like portals whereat hope might be abandoned.

It gave her a little sense of fear to see them. She was glad to be at a distance from them. She pictured them the haunts of those weird creatures, nameless and unknown, wherewith imagination peoples the sea, cold-blooded, jelly-bodied monsters, with bleared, sightless eyes; armed with an array of telescopic tentacles which, ere a man could turn, have treacherously protruded and have drawn him to his doom. One would need a companion, she reflected, to explore the lairs.

She became conscious of a solitude so vast that she felt lost in it, of a silence that stretched into space. She looked back. She looked forward. She looked seaward and saw that the curving band of blue which cut the sky was darkening to green. It had grown appreciably broader. The sun was sinking toward it. The sea-band glinted sharply at its edge, casting lace-points of light.

She quickened her pace, but without any sense of apprehension. As she went she broke into snatches of song, inspired by the freshness and sweetness of the scene.

On the sea-line gulls disported, running to and fro with a



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quick jerky motion, floating and dipping like playful bathers. The promontory was farther off than she had suspected. She began to wonder if she would ever reach it. It seemed to recede as she approached. At all events her fairly brisk advance for the preceding half-hour had scarcely served to bring it nearer.

All at once the band of blue appeared to rise on edge. It doubled in breadth. It was as though the tide, loitering far out to play amid the shallows, had suddenly remembered its mission, had got to its feet and had begun to come in in earnest.

Still she felt no apprehension. She glanced to the space between the advancing sea and the promontory. She sang as she went.

There was time and to spare, she thought, for rounding it. And once round it she would see the steps cut in its slope, and could climb up on to the road.

When at last she came near enough to see, she was rather dismayed to find the cliff already standing amid little swirling planes of water. These, however, measured only inches. They would involve a wetting of feet. Nothing more. She congratulated herself upon having come so briskly. She had not suspected that time was so scant. She might have loitered longer. She took to her feet and ran lightly forward. She did not wait to remove her shoes and stockings. After her recent experience, she considered it wiser to trust nothing further to tides.

She caught her breath with a little ecstatic sense of escape. Suppose she had found the point impassable! She waited until the eddying currents had receded with a wave. Then, gathering her skirts about her, she plashed in and began to wade. The swirling currents, shallow though they were, seemed endowed with sinewy force. Like infant Titans they caught at her ankles, frothing fiercely. It gave her a little thrill of dread to feel them drag so strong upon her. Suppose she had been ten minutes later! The Titans would by that time have begun to feel their strength.

On the other side of the point she glanced with confidence about her. She drew out of the shallows and stepped once again on dry sand with a feeling of elation. On the other

side of a narrow escape one learns how much one has been afraid. The next moment she was smitten with a new dismay. For, beyond her, forming the other arm of a second bay, was another promontory. And this stood already knee-deep in sea.

The bay was wide at its entrance between the promontories, shoreward it narrowed to an irregular V. Cliffs, overhanging and steep, shut it in like a fortress.

In a moment it came to her that she was in the Dragon's Mouth. And Williams had warned her on no account to get into the Dragon's Mouth.

All at once she thought she heard a shout.

"Hallo! Hallo!" a voice seemed to be calling. "Come back! Come back!"

She decided that it was merely an illusion. The swirl of the waters, which had now begun to break and spit about the cliff, mingling with the drumming of a sudden terror in her ears, had deceived her. But it stirred an uncanny alarm in her. She ran forward, her eyes wildly searching the rocks for some sign of the promised steps. She saw no sign. She ran on rapidly. She buoyed herself with the hope that distance was concealing them. She thought she would find them at a point where a ledge of rock jutted like a frowning brow. Once on the ledge she should be safe.

She dared not look back. She thought by this time retreat that way must be quite cut off.

Suddenly she heard the shout again. Then she heard footsteps sounding rapidly behind her. She was overtaken by a sudden panic. She dared not turn. A touch on her shoulder sent a shudder through her. She stopped, gasped, looked up. It was Sir Nigel.

He was pale, his expression of the gravest. He was drenched to the thighs.

"Didn't you hear me call?" he demanded, out of breath. "You must come back at once. If you ever ran in your life, run now."

He caught one of her hands and began to run back with her along the way she had come. Looking to the promontory, she was surprised to learn the distance she had

covered. Her haste had been unfortunate. Every effort had meant not only added distance, but lost strength.

With eyes strained to the point, they ran in silence, her hand dragging upon his. She ran till she could run no longer. Though his hand helped and encouraged her greatly, she came to a stand.

"For Heaven's sake, go on and leave me," she panted. "I can run no more."

He gripped her hand tighter.

"It is your last chance," he cried. "You must. We have just time."

Immediately afterwards he exclaimed, "Great Heavens!" He gazed with consternation into her face. She had suddenly sunk on the sand. Her eyes stared glassily. Her lips turned blue. Her face was ghastly. Her hand shuddered up to her heart. The excitement and exertion had proved too much. One of the attacks from which she had been free after the first month of her stay at Pentagel was upon her. She crouched upon the sand panting, powerless, in acute pain. He stood beside her quietly. His eyes went occasionally to the cliff.

Then he stooped and scrutinised her. Without a word he took her in his arms and started off with her.

She pleaded and protested.

"Oh, leave me," she gasped, still struggling with her breath. "Leave me and save yourself. Oh! I beg of you to leave me."

She got no other answer than an impatient sound between his teeth. He, too, was breathing fast and heavily. She was a well-grown young woman and, vigorous though he was, to bear her at the pace he was making proved a tax on wind and muscle. He was soon compelled to slacken speed. By this time the attack had passed. She was no longer in pain. She breathed easily. She insisted upon being set down.

She was able to walk, and they went on at a fair pace. But they had lost valuable time. Had she thought to read his face she would have gathered the true gravity of the position from it. Reaching the water they waded in. Small though the waves were, they stood up in fierce little crests and struck against their shins with force. They were soon

up to their knees. The point, about ten yards from them, was already the meeting-place of foaming waters which flung themselves violently upon it from every quarter.

"Wait," he said. "I will go on and see whether it is possible."

Almost immediately he was up to his middle. She could see he could scarcely keep his feet. Each moment the tide poured perceptibly higher. The waters boiled and spat. He struggled back to where she stood.

"It is perfectly hopeless," he said. "We might as well attempt to fly."

"But the steps," she cried. "Williams told me there were steps in the slope."

He smiled rather grimly.

"There are—on the other side of the ridge. I came down by them just too late—in time to see you disappear."

"You came to warn me?"

"I saw the carriage from a distance. I caught sight of you on the sand. Williams should not have allowed it. Unless you know where to look for them it is easy to miss the steps. I hoped to have been in time. I was three seconds too late. The tide fairly races in here."

"Oh, you are too kind," she said emotionally. "How could I have been so stupid? I thought the steps were on this side."

They had waded back to the sand. She stooped and wrung out her skirts, he his trousers.

"Is this the Dragon's Mouth?"

"Yes." He glanced up the steep side of the cliff. It rose almost as sheer as a wall, about thirty feet high. It was smooth and absolutely without foothold. Crowning it stood a number of jagged points.

"That is one of his very decent jaws," he added. He pointed to the further ridge. "That is the other."

"And we shall have to remain till the tide goes down again?" she said dismayed.

From beneath his brows he swept her a searching glance.

"Yes."

She was seized with compunctions.

"I am terribly sorry," she cried, "to have brought you

into this. Why did you not leave me to suffer alone for my stupidity? It was so stupid of me to miss the steps."

"You are not the first person who has done so," he returned, smiling slightly.

"And they had to remain here for hours?"

"For hours," he assented tonelessly.

They were walking briskly now to the fork of the V. He scanned the cliffs with eagle concentration. Sometimes he stopped to observe more carefully some portion which seemed scaleable. But where such a patch afforded foothold it was quite beyond their reach, separated from them by steeps so smooth that a gull could not have found standing.

The bases of the cliffs were hollowed into caves, similar to those she had seen earlier. Now the entrances no longer showed as black voids suggestive of weird inmates. On the contrary, they revealed cool and inviting interiors, illuminated for a distance by the levelling sun-rays.

At the fork of the V, which made a blunt irregular angle, there were two such caverns tunnelled in a solid wedge of rock. The wedge rose thirty feet in height, protruding from the face of the cliff like an immense porch. The top spread in a platform upon which their eyes fastened. Unfortunately it was absolutely inaccessible, being approached on both sides by planes of rock as smooth as glass and slanting outward. In front it shelled up in an overhanging ledge which made the openings into the caves appear like the sockets of two eyes below prominent brows.

"We must choose one of these," Sir Nigel said. He explored first one and then the other cavern. His eye made careful measurements. He took measurements with his cane. He made his selection.

"This shelves farther back and is loftier," he said reflectively.

"Will the tide rise so high?"

He nodded. He seemed to be occupied with his thoughts. He went out again and made another close and careful survey of the cliffs. Then he returned to the cave, where Camilla had seated herself. She was feeling fatigued and depressed.

She vehemently blamed herself for the whim which bade



fair to result so unpleasantly. She had ceased to express her regret. He had received it impatiently. It was beside the question and quite profitless.

Looking seaward now it was difficult to recognise the fair blue ribbon which an hour earlier had softly belted the horizon. The ribbon had melted as though by magic into a tumult of waters, racing, breaking, boiling. The tide had rolled in, and was still rolling with a force and rapidity she could not have imagined. She watched it as it found the footsteps they had left behind them in the sand. It flung itself upon them with a species of devouring haste, as though rabidly following a clue whereby to track them.

For the first time an inkling of the real gravity of the situation dawned upon her.

"Is there any danger?" she submitted to her companion, who also stood watching.

"Danger?" he echoed. He glanced at her as he had done previously, sidelong and searchingly. "Oh, yes, of course," he said. He added cheerfully: "Fortunately we have the cave."

She drew a relieved breath. It was then a refuge!

In less than an hour they were driven to seek it. A wave had stolen stealthily toward them, then, with a little eager spurt, had washed up to their feet. They turned and went silently in.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

## TRAPPED.

Such a noise arose  
As the shrouds make at sea in a stiff tempest.

THE rollers came sweeping landward with the confident mien of homing monsters sure of the prey they would find in their lairs. They advanced with a force irresistible and with a hollow roaring.

From where Sir Nigel and Camilla stood within the cave they could see the strong glide of their backs, smooth and green and cold and glistening like glass. They reared, crested and curled over as they came, losing themselves in the tussle and buffettings of an angry scrimmage. Soon they were flinging themselves upon the cavern entrance, foaming and snapping and spitting horribly.

It was like the encounter of two hostile mouths, ravening, biting, devouring. A lather of foam, resembling the saliva from fierce jaws, was churned into clouts and spat spitefully far up the hollow. Showers of spray scattered by the shock of encounter were driven high into the domed roof. They struck it with sharp sounds of hissing, then dropped with a smack in recoil to the floor.

As the tide rose each wave drove before it a wind which, forced violently through the cave aperture with a clap as of a gunshot, swept a fierce menacing breath into their faces. Part of it escaped, snorting, through a narrow fissure in the roof. Through this daylight filtered, standing aloof as it seemed and revealing the greenish eerie sea-light of the

cavern, as the honest dawn is said to stand aloof from a belated phantom. The floor of the cave shelved steeply back to a distance of some eighty feet.

Sir Nigel had entrenched Camilla behind a buttress of rock, where she stood protected from the wind and spray. He stood beside her. In silence and horror she watched the slow but gradual lessening of the entrance. It offered no more friendly prospect than a span of sky and a mass of seething swirling water, which would suck them into its vortex and break them bone by bone upon the rocks. But yet it was the way to the outer air and that sweet liberty from which they had been cut off, the only way out of their death-trap.

They scarcely spoke. There was nothing to be said. They stood watching that only way out and marking with bated breath the manner in which with every half-dozen waves the water level raised its seething cruel door a little higher. Sometimes for a half minute it appeared to recede. A recoiling wave would drag the waters in a long rush down the shore, leaving their prison door agape as though to tempt a sortie.

Till, gathering force, the next wave would with a clap as of hollow laughter fling itself again upon the entrance. For a moment this would show as little larger than a hand. The wind tore and buffeted up the hollow in a panic to find an escape. Successive waves showed the water line appreciably higher.

The inevitable came. At last there was no opening, no outer air, not even a finger's breadth of sky.

The upper border of the cavern mouth appeared now as a black curve in the green translucency of solid water walling them in.

Camilla recalled the fate and experienced some such sense as those poor creatures must have felt whom in byegone days man's cruelty, for the most part masquerading as religion, built brick by brick into a death dungeon.

By a reciprocal impulse she and her companion turned and looked into one another's faces. In the twilight made by the green uncanny moonshine refracted from the wall of water and the honest daylight entering through the fissure

in the roof their faces showed spectral and strange, Sir Nigel's stern and calm, Camilla's drawn and tremulous. Her dark eyes, intense and glistening in the ghostly murk, dilated upon his with a frightened question.

"You poor girl!" he said in a voice vibrating with compassion. He took one of her hands in his. His pressure, firm and warm, imparted strength. She rallied and smiled—wanly but with returning courage.

"It is—rather terrible," she faltered.

He smiled indulgently and with a shade of humour upon her adverb. He knew the record of the Dragon's Mouth.

The place smelt damp and salt. The air was cool. There was a pungent odour of sea-weed. In a cleft of rock a colony of molluscs had accumulated in a patriarchal mass. There were infants which were merely tiny specks. There were grandfathers and possibly great-great-grandfathers, which, from the security of their stronghold, had been able to reach a Methuselah age and to attain to record dimensions. Tangles of weed hung about the mass like matted hair. No doubt the mollusc hearts (or their equivalents) swelled and rejoiced upon the tidal advent which was life to them. The waves no longer broke now in thunder-claps and hissings. They maintained a continuous dull booming as of distant cannon. In the gloom of the cave could be occasionally heard little eager lappings as of hungry lips.

"Let us go farther up," Sir Nigel said.

Their eyes had been fixed on the glistening edge of a green wedge which was slowly and solidly cleaving its way to them. At times, as though to an impatient impulse from without, it bounded forward. Then it slid sullenly back, leaving a dark stain.

Such an impulse had driven it sharply upward to the level of the niche in which they stood. The toes of Sir Nigel's boots had been wetted.

Camilla searched his face with wide eyes. A suspicion of the truth had dawned upon her.

"Is it of any use?" she asked a little wildly.

He still held her hand. He tightened his hold. Firmly he drew her after him.

"Nonsense!" he said sharply. His jaw set. He stood with his back to the foe gripping her hand and peering up into the shelving reaches of the roof. Higher, the cave floor rose to meet it, not smoothly but in a couple of irregular tiers, making narrow platforms with steep inclines.

His quick eyes found what they sought.

"We shall do best in that corner," he said, pointing. "It will serve us for an hour at least. You will be sheltered and comfortable there. But first you must do a little climbing."

She smiled at his eagerness. It inspirited, almost amused her. Her suspicion of the truth made her wonder he could set a value upon comfort and an hour's respite. Woman yields herself to the inevitable sooner than does man.

"I will do my best," she promised. His eyes sought hers. He smiled with an encouraging conquering charm.

"Right!" he said, and pressed her hand. "Don't again ask if it is of any use. Never strike your colours till you are compelled."

"But is there hope?"

He evaded the question.

"It is a good rule of life," he said. "And we are still in a position to observe it."

With difficulty and at the expense of a few falls he succeeded in reaching one of the ledges. Watching him she admired his agility and strength.

"Now then," he cried triumphantly. He stood flushed and smiling on a narrow platform. He walked up and down, stamping his feet and taking observations.

"There is a vein here of some harder substance," he said. "I don't recognise it. It accounts for the singular formation. It has not worn smooth and rounded like the rest. Now then! Give me your hand. Here is the easiest climb."

He stooped and extended a strong palm to her.

"Take your time. Plant your left foot firmly in that little depression—there by the cleft. Spring when I tell you.

She did as she was bidden. She was lithe and strong, and his eagerness put spirit into her.

"Now," he said. The strong hand seemed to lift her almost bodily to the ledge.

"Good! Here we shall be for some time high and dry out of the way of our friend below."

"After all it may not rise so high," she ventured eagerly. "We have another climb yet," he said. He cast an eye above him. "We shall find comfortable sitting room in the next tier."

He drew out his watch. There was not light enough for him to distinguish the time. He took out his matchbox and struck a light. Apparently learning from it nothing cheerful enough to impart he made no comment. He threw down the burning stick with a little vicious force into the water. It went out with a tiny hiss.

He selected a cosy nook with a rest for her back. He took off his coat and despite her protestations wrapped it round her.

"You're not cold now," he said masterfully, "but you will be presently. Your dress is thin."

He seated himself near. In the dimness his shirtsleeves showed shadowy. She gathered herself into her corner and indulged in a fit of bitter silent weeping.

"If only—" she said suddenly, "if only I had not brought you into it!"

"Don't give it another thought," he insisted. "Are you crying? I beg you not to cry."

As though to draw her mind from the seriousness he added whimsically: "You could never have reached this ledge without my help, you know. And although you appear to undervalue it, the truth is you will be the more cheerful for my company."

They knew one another so little. Despite the friendly impulse which had made her once his guest a gulf of worldly circumstance was between them. Her relation to him was that merely of his wife's nurse. He was her employer, she his paid dependant. The amenities between them had been mere "Good-mornings" and "Good-evenings" and similar banalities.

"A man's a man for a' that" sang democratic Robbie. Yet "for a' that" such is the force of custom that the facts of his rank and the many and great responsibilities devolving upon him vastly enhanced her sense of guilt in being the in-

strument of his death. For the truth that had dawned was now a noon-day verity. Reason and his guarded reticence told her there was little or no hope.

As for herself, she would scarcely be missed. She would slip out of her place in the world of things and before a day had passed another uniformed trained person would have stepped into it. And the change would be scarcely noticed.

With him—how different! Who would continue his many and wise beneficences? Who would, as he had done, employ a clever and resourceful brain for those who had so little wit or wisdom of their own? Masterful they had called him and imperious, yet ever to the benefit of those who so called him.

Moreover, he had so much to lose—rank, esteem and great possessions.

"Oh, if you had not come," she cried with a sudden outburst of emotion. "I am of so little consequence."

He turned and scanned her closely.

"On the contrary," he said grimly. "You had your life—perhaps a happy life—before you. I—" he flung out a hand with a gesture almost savage. "I had nothing."

In that moment she saw him as he saw himself. Position and possessions had counted for little. His sudden fierce dejection showed her a hungry heart, showed him solitary, wifeless, sonless.

She was appalled. His cheerfulness and fortitude had given no clue to such an attitude.

She divined grief and yearnings of a depth and intensity she herself had never imagined. Awed by the truth she dried her tears silently and grew calm.

"Perhaps there is some man you care for," he suggested presently with a compassionate smile.

"No," she said. "I had nothing but my work."

"And it has satisfied you?" He turned his head and looked at her.

"I suppose it has satisfied me," she returned slowly. She wondered that she should be doubtful. Had she ever needed anything beside her work? And of late to this had been added a new and delicious joy in nature, the revelation of a tranquil, beautiful life.

He smiled—indulgently, as one does upon inexperience.

“And have you never loved?”

She murmured “No.”

Half her attention was absorbed by sudden introspection. Her heart stumbled and stopped. She lost herself amid a tumult of emotions.

His eyes were on her. She sat looking before her, no longer at the water, stealing like a black and stealthy horror toward them. But farther—much farther—beyond the cavern mouth, beyond the sand and sea to an horizon, the horizon of the heart.

His eyes followed the outline of her profile. They dwelled on the dark far-seeking eyes, unconscious of him. He turned his looks to where she looked, as though trying to discover what she saw. After a minute he stole out a hand and took hers.

“You poor girl,” he said. “To have lived—yet never to have lived.”

He pressed her hand. There were compassion and compunction in his touch.

She came back with a shock. The warm, kind pressure flashed a light into her soul. Her dark eyes gazed into his with mystical amazement.

“Is—love—really so—wonderful?” she asked on a hushed breath.

“Sometimes,” he said, smiling gently.

A thought sped to her mind.

“You love somebody?” she submitted timidly. His bondage took a new and still more cruel aspect.

“No,” he sighed. After an interval he broke out harshly: “What a fiasco we have made of life! How we have bound ourselves with conventions and absurd restrictions! God made us men. Civilisation makes us mannikins. Our world is no longer a place to live in, but only a place in which to keep some or another sort of shop. Conventional quibbles, not human laws, control us. And here are you and I—adult human beings—I indeed middle-aged) about to end our days without having lived. Life without love is, so far as the person who lives it is concerned, a life wasted. The greatest and most illumining of human experiences has been missed.”

"Ah, but there are lessons to be learned from trial and unhappiness?"

"True, but not from negation."

"Yet self-abnegation is noble!"

He smiled.

"Negation is no more self-abnegation than darkness is light."

"Yet," she objected, "happy people—men and women happily married—are frequently commonplace. And they do not even know that they are happy."

"The persons you mean," he said, "are not happily married. Nobody who has loved can ever again be commonplace. These persons have never risen higher than the domestic affections—a very different thing from love."

"Well," she said frankly, "compared with the majority of people you have had a very great deal in your life."

He smiled at her candour.

"Mere compensations for what I have missed."

"Yet some persons have neither your privileges and possessions—nor love."

"Nearly all lives have compensations," he insisted. "The unfortunates are those so constituted that they will not accept the compromises of existence. They know what they want and no substitute will serve."

Suddenly he moved up beside her. He caught her hands and gripped them tightly.

"Can you not understand?" he said in a voice which seemed ground out of him. "All these years I have lived solitary. To some men a woman to love and by whom to be loved is the very breath of life." He broke off short. "And I wanted a son," he said more calmly, "to inherit the lands of my fathers, to hold in my arms, to see him grow into a clean and clever youngster, and be a better and a happier man than his father."

"Oh, I understand. I understand," she cried, the tears rolling down her cheeks. "It must have been so hard. It is so sad and pitiful!"

"Now," he said with compunction, "now, I have made you cry. Well, I have done. My wants will soon be at an end. But I beg you not to cry on my account."



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He loosened his grip of her hands. He held them gently and kindly.

"Tell me your wants," he bade her. "It occupies the time."

She was stricken by a sense of forlornness. For the first time in her life, by the light of his intensity of desires, she learned the truth about herself.

"I believe I have never before known there was anything in life worth wishing for."

He made an impatient gesture. "Monstrous!" he cried, "for a woman like you. Did I not tell you we have turned life into a fiasco? A system that admits of such a woman mewing herself with disease and pauperdom, or, for the matter of that, with disease and luxury, is a fool system."

He started up, as though intolerant of sitting longer under it. His voice rang scornful.

"Truly a fool system which allows such women to go to their graves without having paid their natural tribute to the race—without leaving sons and daughters to lift the level of mankind and stem the tide of effeteness and degeneracy! A fool system which sets nincompoops and rascally company-mongers for the most part at the head of things and leaves the best men—the straight, sincere and single-minded—even genius—to die in garrets."

"But you must not blame the system for my shortcomings," she objected. "It is my own fault that I have not married."

He looked down upon her as he stood beside her. By the light descending through the crevice her foreshortened charming contour and the fuller happier curves her face had taken under her more easy life showed pale, but full of womanly power and sweetness.

"Oh! no doubt you have had love made to you," he cried, "by frock-coats and tall hats—by busy men too tired by generations of the struggle for bread to know how to love. Or, for that matter, by men relieved of the necessity for struggle yet tired and effete by the inanities of fashion. The hearts of women like you are hidden deep—like diamonds in the earth, or," he laughed lightly as though to cover sentiment, "or like pearls in the sea perhaps and other



treasures. It needs a man of a little fire and enterprise to find them."

Though the heat and thrill of his voice showed sincerity and interest in what he said, she could not be sure how much of his talk was meant to distract her attention from the situation. She guessed that his quick brain and keen perceptions kept him all the while acutely sensible of the sure and stealthy rise of water. It had been steadily encroaching and showed now beneath them as a black engulfing void. From it, as from a vault, rose chill and clammy airs. To impulses without sometimes it leapt with little eager murmurs. It lapped the rock with lickings as of menacing impatient tongues.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE BLIND GOD.

She had lived always in his heart ; he had always known her and had always worshipped her. They were part of the holy breath which, flowing through silence like an incantation, had summoned the stars out of chaos.

ALL at once he stooped and said in a voice intensely calm :  
 " Friend, we must go higher ! "

She rose immediately. With an effort she stifled the sob of terror that sprang to her throat. It was all so horrible—horrible! Inexorable law, ruthless in its undeviating fulfilment, seemed to efface all evidence of God. Were He, indeed, in His earth, as she had believed she saw Him that day and many other days at Shingle Bay, why did He allow this cruel thing ?

She stood stunned before an infinite array of horrors which straightway filed across her mind. Since the beginning of time, by man's inhumanity to man and woman —aye, even to babe—or beneath the workings of His own immutable ordinances, these things had been. And He had not lifted the All-Saving Finger of an All-Powerful Hand to avert them. The knowledge fortified her. The infinitude of numbers dwarfed her single case. The vastness of suffering showed herself a speck. There was no escape. Why should there be escape? There had been no escape in the cases of those others, and those others—even the poor babes—had borne !

Sir Nigel had climbed to the higher ledge. There was not

space enough between it and the roof for him to stand. He knelt and stretched down a hand.

"Come," he said gently.

She gave one glance backward. Then she put her hand into his with the tenacity of desperation.

With a strong effort on both their parts she was lifted beside him.

There was space enough for them to sit. Even so her nurse's bonnet touched the roof. She untied the strings and, drawing out the pins, removed it. She sat with it resting in her lap. Its uses had come to an end, she reflected, looking down upon it. The straw shape showed black in the obscurity. She could make out a faint blueness at the edges of the velvet trimming. The light caught the steel buckle, glinting cheerfully. She had a thought to let it slip into the water. Her mind gave her a confused medley of Mahomet and the mountain. The mountain was coming with a vengeance!

She had not the heart to let it slip. It was a familiar friendly thing which had served her. She felt an affection for it. Moreover, it was a last link with that life and work whereof the sands were running out.

As they were now placed, the fissure in the roof was above and to one side of them. It measured six or seven inches at its widest. It was cleft irregularly and ran across the roof. Over it the wind swept with joyous sounds, the sounds of a wayward freedom. She recalled the words *bloweth whither it listeth*, which had always seemed to her to express so perfectly its wilful methods. She envied its liberty. She had a sense that it realised their plight—and exulted afresh in its freedom. She thought it leapt the fissure hurriedly, as though trepidant lest it too should be trapped.

Sir Nigel had earlier explored the cleft. It was useless for purposes of escape. It measured no more than inches in width. Its walls were twelve feet deep.

Through it they saw that the sky was fast darkening. A few stars twinkled. From time to time the wind, blowing over the land, brought scents of hay and flowers and the sweet life of June. That life seemed all at once a hundred-fold delectable.



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Sir Nigel moved immediately below the fissure. He curved his hands about his mouth and hallo'ed loudly up it. His voice rang flat against the roof.

After the calls, the wind came and lingered as though listening with bated breath. But none else came.

"Nothing could be done," he said. "There are twelve feet at least of rock between us and the upper air."

By the light of matches, which Camilla held, he pencilled a few words on an envelope he found in his pocket.

"Have you a pin?"

She gave him one.

He took off his necktie and, twisting an end of it about the missive, pinned it securely within the folds. He tied the other end about the crook of his cane.

Then, gripping the rock with one hand, with a sudden jerk he shot the cane up the fissure.

They heard it sharply strike the rock above them as it fell.

The hoarse, abrupt cries of gulls, startled from their sleep, came down the cleft. They circled and cried for some minutes, clapping their wings smartly. Then they settled again to sleep, and there was silence.

"The cane will be found," he said, "and tell our story."

He took out his watch, and struck another match.

The flame showed his face calm and resolute. It glistered upon the gold and grey of his moustache.

She asked what time it was.

"Just eight," he answered. "We have been here nearly three hours."

He made a rapid calculation. His lips and fingers moved. He looked down at the ever-rising surface. In the flicker of light it gleamed oily and of a dull black. His eye measured the distance between themselves and it.

Then he cast the match-stick savagely into it. It hissed and went out. Its tiny hiss in protest at extinction was the expression of a law as infallible as the law of tides.

They did not speak again for some time. They sat staring up through the rift into the darkening sky. They watched the drift of stars across the rent. The transit of a spark across the void was made in minutes and measured

by inches; yet they knew it to be the sweep of a great world through leagues of space.

"It is a comfort to see the stars," she said, in a shivering voice, as a fine effulgent point, crackling with pride and azure light, drew over a lip of the rift.

It was dark now in the cavern. They could scarcely see an outline of one another. Sir Nigel's shirt-sleeves still showed as a faint apparition. Above them the wind blew with a desolate sound. Now it blew chill, and swept little shivering airs upon them. It no longer brought joyousness and rifled sweetesses. It seemed burdened by their griefs.

From below came those stealthy lappings of a wide soft mouth.

He moved up close beside her.

"You poor girl!" he said, in tones of great pity. "Women were meant for gentler treatment. They should pass in a quiet bed, eased by kindness and by the tears of their beloved."

She broke down and cried a little.

He put his arms round her and drew her into a strong and comforting embrace.

"If you had been my woman," he said, "I think I would have made you love me."

She felt a flame as of immortal fire enwrap her. Her hands melted into his like light into light. She felt no contact of his arms and body. Flesh became fluidic. Her pulses ebbed and flowed with his in a palpitant warm tide.

She yielded him her spirit pure and virgin-sweet.

"Oh, I should have loved you. I should have loved you," she cried passionately. "I had never known a man like you."

He folded her more closely. He pressed her face against his breast. He bent his own to meet it.

"Who knows," he said, "but that you were meant from the beginning of time to be my woman? At all events, let us suppose so while we may."

"Yes, yes, let us suppose it," she murmured. "It makes me feel so brave and strong."

They sat knit together in a kind embrace. Their flesh thrilled and sweetly trembled. It confided an infinitude of



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happy knowledges, the one to the other. For this God had destined it. It murmured a thousand tender chidings for the long delay. What dull stupidities of life had been keeping them apart? Apart they were two imperfections, two hapless halves crying out for one another. Together! Behold them, a golden glowing consummation.

Camilla awoke to the knowledge of life. She had found the answer to the questions that her eyes had asked her. This was the eternal wisdom that the nature-sprite had whispered.

The dark place was filled with beautiful light. The cavern became warm and fragrant with the breath of roses. Like incense floated a perfume as of white lilies with the sun lying tender in their virgin chalices.

A profound peace stole over her, the peace of a soul which has found its heaven in a heart. In the silence she could hear her body, like a strand of sensitive strings, swept by the winds of his uplifted spirit, utter a thousand raptured harmonies. Her breasts swelled and palpitated like two white birds, trembling to soar. Each had a red and tender heart in it.

His breath fanned her, virile, magnetic, subjugating. Her own breath came faintly. On the heights where she stood she was breathing a divine ether. Air was superfluous.

"Are you a god?" she whispered in a dreaming wonder.

"No, dear," he said, and kissed her. "I am only a man."

The kiss made a new wonder for her. She had never suspected that there was a spirit in her lips.

"Oh, how can this be?" she cried a little wildly, lifting her head and letting it drop again upon his breast. "How can this be when I scarcely know you?"

He put a hand upon her head and stilled its trepidations.

"In the last hour I have begun to think," he answered, "that the time when I did not know you goes too far back for history. Our two souls, perhaps, have come together through immemorable lives."

"Have we lived before? Shall we live again?"

"At this moment," he said, "I believe anything and

everything. Your soul is a lamp which shows me the supremest truths. It may be that we have lived, and shall live again until we are great enough to elope together to the stars."

"At present," she murmured, nestling in content to him, "we are only two poor helpless persons, at the mercy of the tide."

"Yet I feel strong enough," he said, "for your sake, to rend rocks. My heart is like a charge of dynamite. Tides seem trivial things. Such magicians are your hands and lips, dear!"

She heard him with charmed ears. What matter though the waters lapped and threatened! For another hour, at least, she would live in his arms, the spell of his voice would be upon her.

They were silent for some time—a silence vibrant with the speech of souls. They watched a star, not this time spluttering crackling light, but soft and radiant like a golden lamp, swing like a beneficent promise across the void. At the edge it lingered, glancing a benign and routhful eye upon them. It seemed loth to pursue its majestic way, leaving them there. Then it was gone at the tug of imperious law.

It had looked upon them with an eye so soft and merciful that its disappearance left her with a sense of loss.

Lest he too might feel it, she stole up a tender hand and laid the palm along his cheek. He moved his lips and kissed it.

The action swept a passionate fire through her, fire even to her chilled feet.

"Oh, I never knew," she faltered brokenly, "that love could be so beautiful—and beautiful a thing."

"Nor I," he said, "until you have just now taught me. Love is a house of many storeys, a house with fine and stately rooms. Yet few of us rise above the basement. Dear, you have opened a door in the roof, and we are among the Stars."

"It must have been you," she insisted gently; "I did not know the way. For I have never before been in the house."



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"And I," he said, with an edge of grimness in his voice, "had never climbed above the second floor. That seemed good enough—better than most things in life. Until a magician showed me the door in the roof—and the Stars."

"Oh, I am jealous of the second floor," she cried.

"Don't be," he said. "There were only compensations there."

"Few women understand," he resumed presently, "how lightly men take that which is lightly given. Such things don't count. They are but skin deep. A man tries this and tries that, seeking to still a fever in his soul. But this and that do not still it, and so he finds—if the fever be of the soul. Only the woman he is looking for can still it, and she takes long to find, my dear. And he may find her too late."

After a while he gently dislodged her head. Sitting up he leaned down and felt her shoes and the edges of her skirts.

"You must put up your feet," he said. "The water is within an ace of you. I suddenly discovered myself ankle-deep in it. That comes of philosophising," he added whimsically.

She drew up her feet as he bade her, and sat with them tucked beneath her. He gathered her skirts carefully round her, in order that she should not be wetted till the flood should reach the ledge.

He crouched beside her in cramped discomfort. He drew her again into his arms, and set her head against his breast.

"I have been looking for you all my life," he said, "I had given you up. Now I have found you I will keep you as long as I can."

The reminder of danger roused no fear in her. Her heart sang. The cavern was a rose-bower, warm and fragrant. She would not have exchanged it for a world—where he was not.

"Oh," she cried, "if every woman had a man like you to love, how life would be changed. There would be light in people's faces as they walked about. There would be no streets, but only rose and lily-paths, with violets under their feet, and trees to shade them from a sun that would never

cease from shining. There would be no shops, no poor, no sadness. Everybody would gladly give of what they had to every other for the love of love, and for the delight of giving. What a world—what a world it would be."

"Yes, things would be different," he said, "if all women were like you."

"Oh, I am not afraid now." She laughed exultantly. She bent and plunged a hand into the water. "You may do your worst, you cold-hearted, treacherous thing! Cruel and cold as you are, I am warm and brave and happy. You may take my life, but you cannot quench a spark of what is here."

She set the wet hand to her breast. She broke into a passion of soft tears.

To his comforting arms and words she said, "I cry for happiness. I see a great light. It will be only a few minutes and then peace. Hold my hand tightly. Oh! hold it tightly that our souls may slip hand in hand out of our bodies and into a new life. So, we shall not be separated for a moment."

He shook his head quietly in the dark. He smiled dejectedly. His more scientific mind, realising vast law which weighs infinitesimal spirit-differences and determines the exact place in nature each human entity has won for itself by its past, saw less Arcadian and happy possibilities. Death, which would part their hands, would part their spirits. Re-birth might place a continent between them. There was probably some plane of spiritual existence where for a space they might linger together. But re-birth would be according to the evolutionary needs of each.

"It may not be so simple, dear," he said. "But by all the laws of affinity and spiritual gravitation we shall surely meet again."

The water seemed long in finding the ledge.

"Perhaps even now it will not reach us," she said, with a sudden hope. Joy leapt in her to think that the sweetness she had found might not, after all, be so swiftly extinguished. In her exalted mood, the barriers between them were forgotten.

He did not speak. He had no heart to dash her hope.



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But one of his hands, bent over the crook of the ledge, was keeping measure of the steady rise.

Presently she broke into a shudder.

"Here it is!" she said.

Some impulse from without had occasioned an abrupt rise. It flooded the ledge, wetting her dress. It receded. But the wash soaked her clothes and found her limbs.

She gave a little gasp as one does at a plunge into chill water.

"The worst is over," she said. "The reality has come. After all, it will be little more than a prolonged cold bath. Then—sleep."

"Little more," he assented.

"And we must not forget that but for the tide we might never have found one another."

"No," he said. But his tone showed no cordiality toward the tide.

"If you were not here it would have been so terrible. And because you are here it is still more terrible. How you will be missed!"

"Not I," he scoffed. "Half of them think me a misguided eccentric—the other half have a sort of suspicion that I am working in some or another way for my own ends."

"They cannot be so base."

"Not base," he said. "But people see no farther than their range."

The water now reached to her knees. Her clothes were wet to the waist.

By June the sea is comparatively warm. For a while she did not feel distressingly chilled. By the time, however, that it had risen to her waist her teeth were chattering. Shuddering chills ran up and down her spine.

He, more vigorous, withstood it better. He drew her on to his knees and chafed and kissed her benumbed hands.

"Courage! Courage!" he exhorted.

"Oh, I am brave," she said.

The roar of the breakers on the rocks outside kept up a continuous low booming in the cavern. Through the rift

descended intermittent sounds of spluttering and seething as the monsters were ripped into rags on points and ridges.

About them the water swelled and swirled in heavy mass, now sank a little, with a horrid sucking sound. As it sank they felt the tug of it, dragging at their clothes. With his knees crooked he used his legs as levers, by which to press his back firmly against the rock. So, he prevented a wedge of water from insinuating itself behind him.

She laid her cold chattering cheek against his. She had begun to feel faint from exhaustion and numbness. Yet there was light still before her eyes, warmth in her heart. Physical exhaustion gives rise sometimes to spiritual exaltation. The numbness of her body quickened forces which sped crowding to her brain. After a while, she was not sure but that she was already dead.

Then his voice whispering courage, his arm tightening round her, recalled her.

"I am glad we see the stars," she murmured faintly.

He tightened his hold upon her. He knew she could see no stars, with her eyes against his breast. He feared for her reason—dreaded some sudden movement which might precipitate matters.

He, too, began to shudder and his teeth to chatter. The water swirled about him now breast-high. She, supported on his knees, was higher out of it. His limbs were cramped. He wondered how much longer he would be able to hold on—how much longer he would be able to support her.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

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Of all men there is but one whom a woman can love. By the same token of all women there is but one for whom a man can care. In looking for that woman he may have a series of deceptive experiments. The objects of his experiments will, as a rule, be of the same type. But one will be lacking in this, another in that; none will be the ideal to whom, meanwhile, he is so faithlessly faithful. For this inconstancy of his is really fidelity, rewarded at last, perhaps, by the appearance of the woman herself. When this occurs he is in luck, she too, provided and on condition that he also is the one for whom she is hunting.

SUDDENLY he drew a mighty breath. He planted his feet more firmly upon the ledge, driving his back against the rock.

The one glimmer of hope he had kept all through, but had not dared to express, flashed into certainty. For ten whole minutes the water had not risen. With a grim lucidity of mind he had been marking its level with the fingers of his right hand, expanded fanlike at his comrade's back. In nature there is no pause. She is always advancing, or she is receding. That minute in which the tide ceases to rise it begins to fall. He knew that the tide had begun to fall.

"My God!" he murmured between his chattering teeth.

He waited another ten minutes, his fingers retaining their spread at her back with an immobility upon which life might have hung. The uppermost of the fingers began to tingle. A little warmth came to it.

"Great God!" he said again between his teeth. He knew



that the water, which ten minutes earlier had covered it, had now sunk below it.

He could scarcely believe even now that this was not a temporary lull. Though his mind was clear, it was not normal. Time seemed longer or shorter than it was. He sat hugging his breath, his whole consciousness centred in his fingers.

Another finger tingled and grew warm.

Then the waters swelled, and, with a sudden spiteful rush, re-covered it. Some drops were spat into his face. But in the darkness his face retained a dragged spasmodic smile. For the wash had not reached that first one of his fingers to be uncovered. Spit as it would, the foe was leashed by immutable law!

The numbed, drenched woman lay leaden in his cramped arms. Her breath came in shuddering gasps. Now and again she was shaken by convulsive shiverings.

"Are we still alive?" she asked him faintly. "I cannot feel myself."

When his lowest finger was a-tingle, he stooped his mouth to her.

"Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," she answered dully. "But why have you gone so far away?"

"Listen," he said, and shook her gently. "Rouse yourself. The tide has turned, and the water is sinking."

"Do you understand?" he said again. "The tide has turned, and the water is sinking."

"*The tide has turned, and the water is sinking,*" she repeated mechanically. "But why have you gone so far away?"

He lifted her higher in his arms. With his numbed hands he pressed and rubbed her numb limbs.

The action warmed and invigorated him. He was a man of intense vitality and nervous force. His spirit swelled. He glowed with an exultant triumph. He had fought death for her. Out of his very jaws he had brought her. Some hours earlier he had told her that life held nothing for him. Having so nearly lost it, he knew now that mere life—the power to breathe, the strength to move, the brain to think



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were infinitely good. And within those hours had been added something infinitely more precious.

He felt for his matchbox. It was difficult to find his pocket. His vest was a mere soddened mass. Transferring the box to the hand at Camilla's back he struck a light.

The face of the foe showed oily and wrinkling with a thousand evil creases. One could believe that malign eyes winked in it. It went lapping and sucking assiduously in nooks and crannies, as though still savagely seeking a way to them.

He turned the match-light on Camilla's face. It lay against the cheerless comfort of his soddened clothes, pale and calm, and with widely opened eyes.

The light woke some consciousness in her.

"You have come back, then," she said, lifting the wide darkness of the eyes to his. She smiled wanly and tenderly.

He cast the match into the malign face—this time not with the anger of despair, but with fierce defiance. It hissed and went out.

"We have both come back," he answered sturdily, "out of the very jaws. We are safe. The water is fast sinking."

"Then we are still alive," she muttered.

"Poor girl!" he said, seeing the bewilderment of her face.

When the water had sunk below the ledge, he made her sit up, and move her chilled limbs. He wrung out her wet skirts and beat her numbed hands between his.

She came presently to her senses. She was able to sit without support, while he stood up and squeezed out the wet from his own clothes. He walked to and fro the ledge, stamping his feet. It was quite dark. He guided himself with a hand.

"Now I am warm," he said. Her hand was taken in a glowing one. "Do you think you can stand?" She was too numbed and weak. She broke still into fits of shivering. He knelt beside her, and, grasping her hands, made rhythmic movements with her arms. Warmth soon followed.

"I wish I had brandy for you," he said. He sat close up to her, and put his arms about her. "We must get you warm."

There was a note of impersonality in his voice. His arms imparted only warmth.

Slowly her consciousness cleared. The situation began to present itself to both. Depression followed upon mental exaltation. The cold sounds of the washing waters chilled them. The wind blew across the rift with frigid whisperings. The failing night grew grey. Through the rift the stars stared coolly and curiously. They seemed now to stand aloof, like conventional eyes. The light faded in Camilla's soul. The cavern lost its semblance to a rose-bower. The mystic warmth and fragrance yielded to salt, damp odours—the thanksgiving of weeds and crustacea for the tidal renewal of their lives.

Shivering in every limb, she became aware of herself as a woman who an hour earlier had lain passionately clasped to the breast of another woman's husband. She remembered, with biting shame, that she had yielded her soul to him without reserve.

They sat a little apart, now and then speaking in low tones, and sometimes on chattering breaths, of the time, of the cold, of the grief and consternation that would have been felt at Pentagel.

"I am afraid you will suffer from the long exposure," he said, rather conventionally.

"I think not," she returned. "I am strong."

"Hot baths and hot coffee and brandy will be our first business," he said, after another interval.

She assented absently.

It seemed a dreary business. She wished, from the depths of her chilled and weary soul, that the tide had done its worst. This was such a sorry anti-climax to a mood which had soared to the stars, this return to soaked garments, shivering limbs, conventions, and hot coffee. Not but that the very mention of these things did not kindle a little glow.

The physical miseries of cold and hunger and exhaustion are extremely real miseries. And to these were added mental distress and mortification.

So soon as the tide had sufficiently receded, he helped her down the dripping slopes. Drawing her arm through his, he



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walked her up and down the cavern floor, till she was warm.

A long-drawn hiss sounded presently from the cave mouth, the clap of breaking waters and a rush of air.

"Our prison gate is opening," he said.

He made her withdraw again into the niche where they had stood before. With the widening of the aperture the draughts swept chill and strong.

She listened, sick of heart and body, to the renewal of sounds to which some hours earlier she had listened with such different emotions. Then there had been the nervous exaltation of excitement and horror. Now she was exhausted in body and perturbed in mind.

A speck of light glowed in the distance, gliding slowly across the aperture.

"Can it be a star, so low?" she asked.

"A steamer," he said.

Dimly now they could distinguish a tossing span of phosphorescence where the sea and night met. It seemed to her they watched it for interminable hours. It sank lower and lower. At intervals they paced about to warm their chilled blood. Presently he went forward to explore.

"The sea is smooth," he said. "The entrance is free. But it will be some time yet before we can round the ridge."

Not long after she was startled by a sudden loud "Hallo!" It was repeated again at the cavern mouth. "Hallo!"

She recognised his voice. She moved, as quickly as her stiffened limbs allowed her, down the slippery floor.

"What is it?"

"Look," he said. "There are lanterns. They are searching for us."

Some half-dozen tiny points of light were seen moving at a distance.

He put up his hands. "Hallo!" he shouted again more loudly.

The points stopped still. Then they began streaming quickly toward one another. They stood in a cluster, some merging into others.

Again he shouted.

Immediately the cluster spread and separated. Several faint "Hallo's!" arose. The lights shot rapidly forward. They disappeared behind the promontory which now showed as a black wedge ribbing the shore.

He still shouted to give them their direction. Shouts came in return. They drew nearer.

"They will be able to wade round the cliff by this," he said.

Presently a light appeared at the end of the promontory, another and another. They approached rapidly, swaying and jolting in the hands of men running hard.

"They will be with us in a minute," he said. His voice dropped. "The night is over."

Standing beside him, she felt a little undulant magnetic wave traverse the space between them. On an impulse her hand slipped silently into his. She lifted his to her numbed lips and kissed it spasmodically, the only rendering her spent body was able to make of emotion.

"Oh, you have been so good—so good to me," she murmured.

He pressed the hand firmly and dropped it. He did not speak.

In half a minute they were surrounded by a group of men. Their faces showed livid in the flare thrown upward from their lanterns. Their eyes protruded, their mouths dropped wide with breathlessness and apprehension.

Ashby, the agent, was first. Behind him came Williams, the coachman, then Lewis, the gardener, and others.

"Sir Nigel! Sir, are you all right?" Ashby gasped, staring at the two drenched, shivering figures, revealed by the flare of lanterns. "We've been out all night looking for you."

"Thank you," Sir Nigel said. Then: "Have you a brandy-flask?"

Ashby handed him one.

"Thank God, you are safe," he said. "It is a miracle."

The men stood round them, gazing as though upon persons risen from the dead.

Sir Nigel, having vainly attempted to pour brandy into the



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cup of the flask, returned the flask and cup to Ashby. His fingers shook spasmodically.

"Pour some," he said, "and give it to Miss Braeburn. She is half dead from exhaustion."

Then he took a draught himself.

"We escaped by the skin of our teeth," he told them. "When the tide turned, the water was about our throats."

A murmur rose hoarsely. The men still stared as though they could not believe their eyes. One choked, and drew the back of a hand across his lids.

"We never thought to see your honour alive," he faltered. "Nor the poor lady neither."

"Aye, it's a death-trap, sure enow'," another muttered. "An' a many's died in it."

"Now then," Sir Nigel said, the most practical among them. "How are you going to take the lady home?"

A baggage cart was waiting in the road, stocked with blankets and hot tins.

At Ashby's word one of the men—a great sheepish Cornishman—picked up Camilla as though she had been a child, and walked away with her.

Sir Nigel declined the aid of an arm.

"I shall do very well," he said.

"Such a sperrit!" Lewis commented, as he marched away with a swinging stride, his soaked, clinging clothes the sole evidence of his terrible adventure. "Nobody before has ever got out alive. 'But,' said I to Mrs. Merritt, 'If there's anyone could do it, that gentleman's his honour.'"

As Sir Nigel went he instructed the agent to commence blasting operations in the morning. A jutting shelf of rock was first to be disposed of.

"And then we will have an iron ladder with a hand-rail up the cliff. It should have been done long ago," he observed cheerfully.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

"TELL ME YOUR NAME!"

My heart is richer than the Vales of France,  
I will not part with such a man as thee.

FOR two days Camilla kept her bed. During the first twelve hours she lay in the dreamless sleep of exhaustion. She awoke with a chill and a slight heart attack.

The events of those momentous, yet poignantly sweet hours, returned in vivid snatches. She saw the waves advance upon them in ferocious triumph. She saw the caven-mouth gradually close. She heard the thunder-claps of sound. She heard the hollow booming. The blasts occasioned by the driven wind pursued her. With her hand in his she climbed to the ledge. She heard the wind blow hollowly across the rift. She saw the stars drift slowly.

His arms enfolded her. She was vibrant again in the thrill of his strong life. His words returned. "*If you had been my woman, I think I would have made you love me.*"

And: "*Who knows but that you were meant from the beginning of time to be my woman! Our souls, perhaps, have come together through immemorable lives.*"

His voice materialised. She started, blushing in a tender tumult to hear it sound beside her. She buried a shamed, hot face in her pillows, remembering all that her passionate abandon had replied. Her cheek thrilled where it had lain against his breast. She looked at her hands for marks of his tender grip. Her tears flowed passionately at the recollection of his fortitude and kindness. All his thought had been to soften the hardships and terrors for her. She felt

herself charged with new potencies, with sweet amazements. This then, was love, this beautiful knowledge that had come to her, this strange commingling of passionate human blood and immortal starlight.

Life was revealed in rainbow tints. Yet beneath it all there was the grind of grief. The cruel edge of circumstance was set to the roots of happiness. Blood and sweetness kissed.

At times a sudden subtle thrill was borne to her—Heaven knew how!—filling her soul with ecstasy. She knew his brain was flashing fond intelligences to her. Though sweet, they alarmed her. They showed her love as no mere pleasant episode, but as a force of souls, a power invincible, a tide like the tide of oceans, controlled by the sun and the moon and the eternal stars—a thing to sweep a woman from her feet.

"A third day in bed," Dr. Brattleton counselled.

But she could not rest. She fevered for work to absorb her thoughts and restore her lost poise to her.

On the third morning she rose and dressed. Her glass revealed her only a shade paler for her adventure. Out of her pallor her eyes looked like two stars, soft and brilliant, and shooting mysterious light.

He had not expected to see her. The moment he opened the door, his looks swept down the room and found her.

For an instant he stood motionless. Then he advanced swiftly toward her.

After the first glance, her head had drooped over her work. She was taken with a little panic. As he approached she was impelled to lift it. Their souls met and mingled in their eyes.

"Are you well? Are you wise to be about so soon?" he demanded.

"I am quite strong again, thank you," she returned, in a low voice. The scissors in her hand trembled.

They were alone in the room. They stood regarding one another, spell-bound. In his eyes there was a question, masculine, insistent, fierce.

But though his glance drove her heart before it like a frightened thing, she met it fearlessly, ingenuously.

A shade quenched the ardour of his features. His lids levelled. A sigh, virile and profound, escaped him.

"Do you forget," he submitted grimly, "that we have been introduced?"

Her eyes remained steadfast.

"I must forget," she said.

His face expressed a vehement protest. He gave another fiery sigh. Then he smiled upon her—Such a smile! honeyed, conquering, alluring. Behind it were the force and will and passion of a man of steel. It was charged with sweetness, tipped with a diamond-point of irony, an Ithuriel spear to make nothing of all things save love.

They stood ill-matched, she with no more than sincerity and tenderness to meet such an unaccustomed potent weapon. Her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

In a moment the advantage was to her. He was no man to raise a siege against tenderness and tears. He laid down his arms. His smile faded.

In the morning men of the world no longer implicitly believe things which women have told them in the evening. But this morning he knew that all her eyes now told him was sacredly true. She was not a woman of the world, but a neophyte in the courts of love.

He set a hand upon her trembling hand, gripping it, steadyng it. Gently he withdrew the scissors from it. His manner became frank and kind.

"At all events," he said whimsically, "having made one another's acquaintance, let the two persons you and I met the other night shake hands before parting."

She put her hand in his. He held it in a passionate grip. He would not let it go. Then he dropped it, and stood looking at her downcast face. There were pain and longing in his own.

He turned and walked away.

The parting of their hands sent a new interpretation of his words to her. Impulsively she followed.

"You do not mean that you wish me to leave Pentagel?" she said.

He turned. He saw the apprehension in her face.

"How could I wish you to leave?" he answered gently.



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She collected herself. Her cheeks crimsoned. She stood in a confusion.

"Oh! you saved my life," she cried emotionally, "at the risk of your own."

"If so, I have justified my own," he said gravely.

He stretched out a hand and passed it softly down her sleeve from shoulder to wrist, so softly that she felt no touch, only a track of tender glowing as his fingers passed.

"I do not even know your name," he said. "Tell me your name, you sweet person, who have suddenly arisen in my life."

"Camilla."

"Camilla!" After a moment, "I think I have known you by many another," he said quietly.

Standing beside him she felt herself caught in a spell. They two stood together in a tender isolation from the world. Thoughts flowed and ebbed, like the flittings of dreams. She drew a hand across bewildered brows.

"I distress you," he said. He smiled compunctionously. "Go back to your scissors and bandages." He pointed, smiling, to the table.

She obeyed like one still in a dream. She did not know herself. Heretofore, she had been self-controlled and exceptionally clear-brained. Now she was groping amid reminiscent shadows for her identity. She reseated herself at her table and resumed her work.

He proceeded to his accustomed task. He read extracts from letters and papers. For a time there was a new vibration in his voice. This passed. She was presently listening with the old charm to the beauty of his tones and diction.

Before he left he again sought her. Benson had returned and stood near, burnishing the settings of an emerald tiara.

"Please remember, Nurse," he said, in his ordinary manner, "not to walk for any distance along the sands again. It is a dangerous coast, even to those who know it."

"Oh, I shall remember," she promised. She added diffidently, "I hope you have not suffered."

"No further," he said, "than a twinge of rheumatism."

When he had gone:

"My, what a fright we had!" Benson told her. "I don't

believe anybody went to their beds all that night. And to make matters worse, her ladyship refused her dinner, and the doctor had to be sent for."

"I shall never forgive myself for being so stupid."

"You wouldn't have, and I'm thinking nobody else would have forgiven you," Benson retorted sharply, "if Sir Nigel had been lost through you. That would have been a fine business indeed, and him with no heir."

"Not that you're to blame," she resumed. "A many people have been caught and drowned through missing the steps. Sir Nigel is having some of the cliff blasted and a stairway put. So, after all, good will come of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I should think you must feel very grateful to Sir Nigel," Mrs. Merritt said. "He certainly saved your life. You would never have held out so long if it had not been for him. Nobody has been known before to escape from the 'Dragon's Mouth,' as they call it."

Her eyes were so keen and questioning that Camilla flushed a little.

"I can never be grateful enough," she returned simply.

"You would have too much to think about, I suppose, to talk a great deal. You must have felt it rather awkward, knowing Sir Nigel so little and being shut up with him for so many hours."

"He was all kindness and consideration," Camilla said. "I don't think we talked very much. Some of the time I was scarcely conscious."

Mrs. Merritt was a shrewd woman. Camilla found her gaze fixed on her sometimes with a curious regard. She came upon her unexpectedly in the house and grounds. She could not conceal from herself that the housekeeper was setting a watch upon her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The invalid had persisted all this time in retaining the key. She kept it so tightly clutched in a hand, that a little sore resulted in the palm. Dr. Brattleton insisted that it should be taken from her. But its loss so distressed her that, at Camilla's suggestion, it was sewn into a little chamois-leather bag and restored to her.



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Sir Nigel had been told of it, but he attached no significance to it.

"It is a whim," he said. "There is nothing of importance in the *escriptaire*. Some day I will look it through."

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For a space the relations between the nurses were strained. Miss Hanson, having taken it upon herself to admonish Camilla severely upon that which she was pleased to style her "*escapade on the sands*," Camilla had retorted with spirit, and, feeling herself to be in the right, she left her aggressor to cool down and capitulate.

This she showed no sign of doing. She was one of those persons who consider that their own strenuousness in religion gives them full authority to prick their neighbours' consciences.

Never to neglect her devotions, sick or well, snow, blow or hail, impressed her with such a sense of personal righteousness, that she felt herself justified in taking to task upon all points those of her acquaintance who prayed and fasted less.

Cicero, however, was the weak spot in her armour. And Cicero proved the means of the nurses' reconciliation. A second time he sickened with some obscure disorder. For twenty-four hours he lay apparently upon the point of death; Camilla rehabilitated herself in her colleague's opinion and won her deepest gratitude by sitting up with him during the night of crisis.

She found it a gruesome enough task watching the tumid, languid body pant as though in serious pain, and drag itself heavily from spot to spot in search of ease. The eye, like an illuminated blood-drop, held her with a lurid glare. Through the door of his pagoda, she scrupulously fed him with brandy and whipped egg. By aid of a pipette she administered the doses his doctor had left for him. He took them meekly, the red eye glinting with a weird intelligence, as though he were aware that these things were for his good.

Sometimes he dragged himself out into the run, and, thrusting a fevered snout between the bars, gazed languidly about him. It was plain he hoped to discover his mistress.

Not finding her, he toiled back and, with a gesture of despondency almost human, dropped his limp body again upon his bed.

Toward morning he was taken with a species of fit. Convulsive throes of cold or of pain coursed up and down him. He panted feebly.

Camilla spent some minutes of contending pity and repulsion. Pity conquered. She opened the door of his pagoda and, with a little sinking at the heart and a reluctant hand, gently took him out. He appeared too spent to realise what was happening. She sickened at the warm, soft feel of his shuddering body. To her a rat was vermin.

She rolled him in flannel and, carrying him to the fire, sat with the warm hollow of a hand upon him. From time to time she fed him from a feather dipped in milk. He sucked it feverishly. His eye of blood was fastened all the while upon her—to all appearance raveningly, but this was merely original nature showing through the second nature of habit. In reality, he was wholly subjugated by his miseries, and showed a self-compassion and a desire for sympathy pitifully human.

He dropped asleep, a pink lid half shutting the sanguinary eye. He awoke better. He cocked his head with a new alertness to some sound in the house. He moved his weary body briskly. Then he nestled, with an appearance of content, within the flannel. Rather to her horror, he thrust up his sharp snout and rubbed it against her with a faint caressing movement. She permitted it. The poor creature was trying to express his gratitude. His hot eye rested with a species of gentle tolerance upon her. She gave him his dose, and he fell asleep again.

Morning was stealing through the curtains, seeming to gaze with looks of grey admonishment upon the yellow lamp and its circle of artificial light, when Nurse Hanson tip-toed in. She had left one sleeping patient in order to gain news of another.

Her face was anxious. Her opaque and prominent orbs were more opaque and prominent from apprehension. She advanced slowly, her face an alarmed question. She seemed afraid to be met by sad intelligence or by a sadder spectacle.



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Camilla nodding cheerfully to her, she glanced from the empty pagoda to the flannel bundle on her knee. She flew to it with a joyful cry and outstretched hands. She flung herself down on her knees. Tenderly she gathered up the flannel and its precious occupant. She bent her cheek to it.

"You dear!" she cried fervently. "I believe you are going to get well."

She turned to Camilla.

"How sweet of you to take him out! I know how timid you are of him."

"I am sure he is better," Camilla said, smiling.

His mistress pressed her other cheek against him.

"He is going to get well," she said.

He woke. He rubbed himself against her. He showed himself equal to a little playfulness. He caught a strand of her hair between his teeth and tugged at it feebly. Then, as though the effort had been too much for him, he let it slip, and dropped asleep again.

She could not remain long. She put him back upon Camilla's knee.

She stooped and gave her an impulsive, awkward kiss.

"I shall always be ever so grateful to you," she said. "You have saved my Cicero's life." Her tears wet Camilla's face.

She hurried away, turning at the door for a last look.

Camilla could not decide whether to laugh or to cry. The little idyll of a rat held something in it of the ludicrous. Yet her poor colleague was deadly in earnest. Her awkward, grateful kiss, her tears, meant much in a woman normally practical and sparing of emotion. Her "You have saved my Cicero's life!" was preserved from bathos by the rough sincerity of her voice.

And, after all, had not poor Cicero, by his docility in affliction and by his little courtesy of caresses, established his tiny claim to human affection?

She ended by adding a few tear-drops of her own to those upon her cheek. By that light which had come into her own life, the life of her colleague showed pathetically sterile and dreary. For all it knew of love was furnished by a humble rodent.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## NESTA'S SEASON.

You have too much respect upon the world :  
They lose it that do buy it with much care.

MRS. DRUMMOND and Nesta had returned to Gweal Court. Camilla received a little note inviting her to tea.

"We are here for July and part of August," Mrs. Drummond told her. "Then we go a round of shooting visits."

She looked fatigued, but pleased.

"We had a delightful season," she said. "It was a perfect triumph for Nesta. I believe she is really one of the most popular girls in town."

If there is one privilege for which one is compelled to pay dearly in this world it is for that of being a popular beauty. The effort of sustaining the high-water mark of looks, the dread of falling below it, the endeavours to supplement the deficit of "ugly" days by smiles and augmented cordialities, all these protracted over a period of months, from the hour of the early morning canter to the small hours of the late Ball, make the life of the woman of fashion threefold more strenuous and rather more anxious than that of the rag-picker. Yet we complain that such women lack heart and emotion, that their morals fall short of what they should be, that even their manners are seamy. We lift hands at cigarette- and morphia- and alcohol-habits, at slang and cake-walks. We deplore the loss of silken habits and the dainty dignities of gentlewomen. Are we not unreasonable? Human capacity is limited. Virtues and dignities demand

seclusion and tranquillity for their development. The Graces could not successfully retain their enchantments on a treadmill.

Nesta appeared like a charming ghost. Her shell-like pinks had vanished. In their stead was a transparent pallor. Her sea-green eyes were ringed with hollows. Delicate traceries, as though a hand had been faintly sketching in the site of future wrinkles, were visible about her lids and mouth. The hand she extended to Camilla was dry and cold.

She wore pretty airs of conquest. She carried her beautiful head with a poise of languid pride. Her eyes were unnaturally full and brilliant, as though they had been fed by the fires of admiring glances. She moved up the room with the graceful arrogance of one who knows no anxieties as to being late, for the reason that she imagines no function begins until she has arrived.

"Oh, yes, I had a topping time," she responded to Camilla's congratulations.

She soon withdrew and sat in a self-conscious pose at the end of the room, a long leg crossed above the other, an elbow on the corner of a table, her chin on a white hand, her beautiful profile slightly tilted, while her eyes on the thickets of flowers in the old wild garden, reviewed the social triumphs she was aware her mother was recounting to her cousin.

"Yes, she looks a little tired," Mrs. Drummond admitted. "If you knew what she has gone through you would not be surprised. My dear, we went everywhere. We just panted through the season. My head was in a whirl. We were six deep in engagements morning, noon and night. Nesta made quite a sensation. It is unique nowadays for a girl to be more than a cipher. The married women have it all their own way. She was so popular that the Duchess of Grandmere took her up. Would not go anywhere or give anything without her. Women do that. They prolong their waning days by taking up a younger, prettier woman, and catching the crumbs that fall from her table. Nesta had seven proposals—three of them from good *paris*, though detrimentals for a girl of her attractions. Nearly all the best eligibles are tied to the apron-strings of some

or another married woman. They're not free to propose—daren't to save their lives. They have to carefully release themselves (if possible) when they see a girl they like. Two men, exceptionally eligible, are just now releasing themselves with a view to Nesta. One is a Russian Prince. Nesta would make an excellent Princess."

"And Arthur Colville?"

Mrs. Drummond smiled.

"He will propose on the first opportunity. He has simply hung on to her skirts the season through trying to find an opportunity. We would not give it. If the Prince falls through—and, of course, his reputation is shocking—Nesta might do worse than accept Arthur. He is so thoroughly nice and so devoted to her. And the Boisragon's is such a very exclusive set. His only drawback is that he is poor. But a man I met—an Australian—told me Lord Boisragon made a good deal of money, and is still making money out of his ranch. His cry of poverty is a pose. But I must first have a talk with him about one or two matters."

"You make it all a mere question of expedience," Camilla protested. "Has Nesta no feeling or affection to help her to decide? Arthur Colville seemed to me a young man a girl might be in love with."

Mrs. Drummond's face fell. She shook her head. She leaned forward and whispered:

"I told you I am sometimes almost frightened at her. It seems unnatural. She looks so girlish and pretty. But she does not appear to know what affection is. It is absurd, of course, for girls to spoil their lives for sentiment. But she goes to the other extreme. I don't believe she cares enough for any one of them to mind which it is she takes for husband."

She glanced askance toward the charming figure at the end of the room. She shook a serious head.

"I am afraid, whoever she marries, there will be trouble. Men expect a little more, at all events, than she will give. My opinion is that men have much more heart than women. And when the first novelty of her prettiness has worn off, although I am her mother, I can't help admitting a husband might be almost appalled at her stony-heartedness. Camilla,"

she added anxiously, "you don't think, do you, that it is the way I have brought her up? Perhaps I have given too much thought to accomplishments and not enough to natural qualities. But, really, I meant it for the best. I was so anxious that she should marry well."

"Perhaps Arthur Colville or some other man will make her care for him, and you will find she has a heart after all," Camilla said hopefully.

But Mrs. Drummond was not convinced.

"There is no heart to find I fear. Love of dress and admiration are a fever with her. And, really, she has been so much admired."

She forgot her regrets and misgivings. She recovered her normal enthusiasms in recounting further triumphs on the girl's part.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

## DIPLOMACY.

And being a woman I will not be slack  
To play my part in fortune's pageant.

Two mornings later, so soon as Nesta, looking charming in a cotton blouse and a broad hat, gay with roses, had started for Trevescan, tennis racquet in hand, Mrs. Drummond sighed, rose from a garden-chair, in which she had been enjoying a sensational novel and the cool freshness of the hour. She proceeded to her room to dress.

"The walk will do me good, no doubt," she said, descending in more cheerful mood. She had paid some attention to her dress. And a good-looking woman who has paid some attention to her dress, is difficult to please if she do not leave her mirror in more cheerful temper than that in which she sought it.

She loitered down the charming garden, loth to exchange its coolness for the hot and dusty road. She gazed along the hot and dusty road with a distasteful countenance. Finally she coaxed back her pleasant mouth to its accustomed pleasant lines, conjured up a smile, and set out upon her mission.

It took her thirty-five minutes to cover the mile between Gweal Court and the Castle. As I have said, she possessed no athletic capacities. She relieved the tedium of walking by recalling the triumphs of town.

Near the Castle she met Arthur in his flannels and a straw

hat. He also carried a tennis racquet and was making for Trevescan. The glare from the sun-baked road showed his face eager and filled with light. His dark eyes sparkled.

"Has Nesta started yet?" he eagerly inquired, as they shook hands. "She would not promise yesterday to wait for me. I wanted to walk with her. We are going to play a match with Flora and Dora Camboyne."

"You idle boy," Mrs. Drummond expostulated, shaking her violet sunshade at him. "Nesta is far more energetic. She started some time since."

His face fell. He began to hurry on, consulting his watch as he did so.

"It is only a quarter to eleven," he said. "We're not due till a quarter past. I know I'm a frightful rotter at getting up in the mornings, but Nesta might have waited for me. Are you going to the house?"

He did not wait for a reply. He smiled in his engaging fashion, lifted his straw hat and broke into a run.

"He certainly is a nice young man," Mrs. Drummond reflected. She sighed—a serene little sigh. She was naturally kind-hearted, and was frequently perturbed because the expediences of life but seldom conduce to the amabilities.

His lordship was at home. She was ushered into the great drawing-room, the faded magnificence of which was tempered by the twilight of drawn blinds. The man placed a chair for her out of line with the stiff array of other chairs, which, as is common in the drawing-rooms of womanless houses, gave an impression of having been arranged for a lecture or a court-martial. He drew up three blinds, disclosing an immediate gorgeous flower-show in the Dutch garden surrounding the house. He observed respectfully, as though the lifting of the blinds had just revealed the fact to him, that the summer had come.

She replied graciously. Like all well-bred persons, if no heroine to her own servants, she was invariably courteous to the servants of others.

Lord Boisragon came in.

His heavy face was loose and lined. His brow was puckered. His eyes rolled with a restless inquisitiveness.

She was all smiles and affability. She admired the lovely grounds. She glanced about the spacious room.

"What a room for a Ball!" she exclaimed.

His puckered brows soon smoothed before the flow of her purring talk, and to her silky tones.

He rose.

"Will you come to the library," he said. "We seldom use this room. I feel like a fish out of water in it."

"Such a pity it should be wasted," she remarked, rising also, and smiling. "Some day, perhaps, when Arthur is married—"

"Oh, that is a long way off," he retorted, with some brusqueness.

After they had seated themselves in the library, he dropping into his accustomed great chair with an expression of relief, there was a little desultory talk, pleasant and light, and with no demand upon his lack of humour.

Then Mrs. Drummond, with an air of womanly trepidation, although her voice was steady and her eye firm, suddenly appealed:

"Lord Boisragon, I beg your sympathy. I am compelled to a most embarrassing task."

He glanced up sharply from beneath his heavy lids.

"I am sure," he answered slowly, as though part of his mind were absorbed in guessing at the nature of the task, "I am sure, no matter how embarrassing, your own cleverness will serve you better than my sympathy."

A plump, well-gloved hand moved in a gesture of graceful disclaimer. Gently she shook her handsomely-bonneted head.

"A widow's is a trying position," she said. "She has learned to depend upon a man's strength and brain, and she finds herself bereft of both."

A shade of alarm, lightened by a flicker of pleased complacency, crossed his face.

Then he set his heels together, pressed his arms firmly along the elbows, ensconced himself lower among the cushions, of his chair, like one preparing to do strenuous battle for his liberty.

He averted his gaze from her fair and pleasant counte-



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nance. He bent it upon some papers on his table, which he proceeded to turn over with a show of interest.

"Ah," he replied, a trifle stiffly, "I fear I cannot offer you sympathy on that score. I have no opinion at all of marriage."

In a moment she had fixed him with a glance more shrewd than she ordinarily permitted herself.

"Yet you married," she observed abruptly.

He raised his lids. Their eyes met. He realised that she had not been entertaining designs against his liberty. He knew her quest now. Vaguely he had supposed that some or another time an explanation would be asked. But he had formulated no plan. He was a man of procrastinations. And he had found that he acted best on the spur of emergency. He acted now upon it.

He gave her no direct answer. He dropped his lids as though nonplussed. He shrugged his shoulders. He smiled with a wicked cynicism. Subtly and cleverly he conveyed doubt.

"My neighbours," he drawled, "say differently."

She could not repress a little exclamation of astonishment. She was betrayed into a stare, her eyes probing his pallid mask-like countenance. His concession took away her breath. Was it stupidity? Was it candour? For what purpose could a man concede an inch of such ground, seeing all that was contingent on his holding it.

She assumed an expression of frankness.

"It was of that I wished to speak," she admitted. Yet she was out of her bearings. Having no clue to his action, she was without key to her own.

"Ah!" he said quietly. Under his mask-like face thought flew like a shuttle.

"Being a widow," she proceeded, "I am, of course, left the sole guardian of my sweet and only child. I pass many sleepless nights in anxiety about her future. Where her happiness is concerned I must spare myself nothing."

She paused, waiting for him to speak. He did not speak. Only the ghost of a smile lurked at the corners of his heavy mouth. His creed was that women were "the very devil." But the tactics of this one were obvious and simple.

"Your son——" she resumed, after a pause.

She paused again. Being called upon to make some observation, he complied with the amenities without in the least committing himself.

"Arthur," he assented, blandly.

She saw she must do it all herself. She summoned her resources. She went on with increasing firmness.

"Your son Arthur has paid a great deal of attention to my little Nesta. People have remarked upon it—are still remarking upon it. For the dear boy shows no diminution of his feeling for her. Dear Lord Boisragon," she entreated, with a selvedge in the silky ribbon of her voice, "you know what a lovable young man he is—so ingenuous and sweet—irresistible, indeed, to a soft-hearted girl. You know—experience must have shown you—how susceptible we poor women are to clever, interesting man. My Nesta is impressionable, a mere romantic, affectionate child——"

Again she paused. "How can one say what I must say without giving offence?"

He showed no sign of coming to her assistance.

"Your's and Arthur's friendship have meant so much to us. We prize it greatly. If this dear boy and girl should come to care for one another—if my sweet Nesta's heart should be stolen, is there—I beg of you to tell me—is there the slightest reason why they should not be married? I confess I have heard rumours. One is ashamed to mention them. I am convinced, of course, that they are cruel falsehoods. Yet I must beg of you to give me your word, to assure me that there is no reason whatsoever why Arthur and Nesta should not be married."

He made a show of being impressed. He seemed to struggle with himself. Then he lifted his mask-like countenance and, fixing his eyes upon her, said abruptly:

"Anything I tell you will be told in the strictest confidence?"

"Oh! absolute."

Her face paled. She had a difficulty in controlling her voice.

"I give you my word of honour," she added, as he appeared to hesitate. A sudden curiosity to know the truth was added to her anxiety.

"Then," he said slowly and firmly, "the truth is, that Arthur's legitimacy is a matter of dispute already in my family. At my death his next-of-kin will claim. Already he is seeking evidence to show I never married Arthur's mother."

"But," she demanded, startled into abruptness. "It is not true, of course? You can, of course, disprove the wicked calumny."

He remained with his eyes fixed upon her. The far-away stare at the back of them appeared to her to hold latitude for illimitable wickedness. Then he said quietly:

"That is the difficulty. And it means an exposure, of course, and a scandal." She shuddered.

"Exposure and scandal," he repeated.

She writhed.

There was a pause. Then:

"Oh," she cried, "do you mean to tell me—oh, that poor young man!"

He spread his large white hands as one who accepts the inevitable. He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"And does he know? Is it fair to him—fair to his friends—to allow him to take the place he does?"

"It only affects just those of 'em who want to marry him," he said, with a coarse laugh. "And as he can only marry one of 'em it really is nobody's business but her's."

"But the mortification and disappointment to himself—"

He clenched a heavy fist.

"They've got to prove it," he broke out.

"Yet," she said, "you have told me."

He regarded her oddly.

"Yes," he said. "I have told you what my family says. But," he made a little bow across the table, "I had your word of honour."

She acknowledged it with dignity.

"Thank you," she said. "Be sure I shall not betray it."

After a minute: "And now tell me—because, of course, I cannot allow my sweet Nesta's prospects to be sacrificed, and I abhor a scandal beyond all things—tell me what we must do. Will you take Arthur away? Or shall I take Nesta?"

He had his answer ready.

"Either would be useless. All you have to do is to give the boy an opportunity of proposing, and to tell Miss Nesta to refuse him."

She glanced up sharply. "You would not approve of the match?"

He raised his brows.

"How could I do so in fairness to your charming daughter—seeing all that would be involved?" he said, with a false smile.

"It would be the same with any girl," she insisted. "No mother—no father—Oh, you must see that it is out of the question."

"The boy is infatuated," he resumed, ignoring her remark. "Where she goes he will follow. I shall not be able to keep him away from her, even if I succeed in taking him away. A 'No' won't hurt him. He will get over it like other youngsters."

She had much ado to maintain her agreeableness. She had never suspected this side of his character. She began to understand him. It had hitherto been one of her articles of faith that all large, dull men were simple and easy to manage. She knew now that this one was more than her match.

It was plain he did not want Nesta for a daughter-in-law. She suspected him of being capable, indeed, of going to all lengths to prevent such a union. Otherwise, would he have made his damaging confession? Her quick brain, accustomed to find reasons of expedience, found two explanations of his action.

Nesta had no fortune. There was some other who had.

Had it not been for the rumours, and that the new glimpse he had given her of his character confirmed their probability, she would have been disposed to suspect his avowal as a ruse. However, this was scarcely credible.

She made her adieux with her accustomed grace. She hoped dear Lord Boisragon would pardon a mother's natural solicitude, and would forget that their delightful friendship had been dimmed by one embarrassing incident. She thanked him for his kindness and his candour. These she

would always remember. She drifted, with thistledown tact, to further praises of the garden. Thence to a few delightful reminiscences of town. Finally, "Good-bye!"

She left with him a distinct sense of loss. The house seemed several degrees more chilly and more dull bereft of her.

With a disappointed face she toiled back over the hot and dusty highroad, a good deal hotter and more dusty than it had been an hour earlier. Now that all likelihood of it was over, it set her on the verge of tears to realise that Nesta would never be Lady Boisragon. The grey old stately pile on its imposing site, the magnificent park, its unique and curious relics, its lords and ladies glancing from the walls, the stories of its house emblazoning the windows, seemed all one could desire. The poverty and shabbiness, which an hour earlier had shown in marked relief, withdrew into the background. Now she experienced no other feeling than that of profound regret.

With a sigh, she found herself wishing she had allowed Nesta to accept the younger son of a noble house. He was not rich, but the girl would have been Lady Charles.

Out of spirits as she was, she remembered that even so charming and admired a person as her daughter might go through the wood in too critical a mood to find only a crooked stick at the end. For Nesta's two other admirers were the cavaliers of married women. And married women, she knew, held their cavaliers with a tight hand.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

## PASSION AND FASHION.

. . . She cannot love,  
Nor take no shape nor prospect of affection,  
She is so self-endeared.

REACHING home she bade the servants set lunch for three.  
She ordered champagne to be served.

When Arthur and Nesta came in she smiled him a most gracious welcome. She invited him to remain. He accepted with tremulous joy. One could see that in playing tennis he had been in courts of elysium.

She sought Nesta in her room, where she had gone to take off her rose-wreathed hat.

"I saw Lord Boisragon this morning," she told her. "I had a talk with him. I need not go into particulars. But if Arthur should propose to you you must on no account accept him. In fact, you must unconditionally refuse him."

Then, as the girl turned and stared at her out of her great green eyes :

"Allow him to propose this afternoon," she resumed a little irritably. "It is best to get it over. You have wasted too much time upon him already."

The brain behind the beautiful green eyes had been busy.

"I suppose he really is illegitimate, then," she said calmly. "What a bore!"

Mrs. Drummond felt her heart sink with a sickening sense.

As she had told Camilla, the girl's utter absence of feeling at times appalled her.

"How can you say such things?" she admonished. "I am astonished at you."

Nesta appeared almost equally astonished at the unaccustomed tone and also at the intimation that she had said anything deserving of reproof.

"Why, of course I had heard, mother. You didn't suppose I hadn't known what was said?" She added with airs of injury, "I think it is perfectly disgusting of Lord Boisragon to let Arthur sail under false colours. He ought not really to mix with other people as though he were all right. Suppose some girl should accept him and not find out until it was too late. There would be a nice thing for her!"

Mrs. Drummond sat looking at her helplessly, that disagreeable sinking behind her faultlessly fitting bodice. She was not herself given to sentiment. But the bloodless imperturbability of this beautiful creature shocked her. She felt as one does in the presence of a handsome snake, repelled yet admiring.

She rose languidly. She thought the hot walk must have been too much for her. Her quick perceptions showed her the absolute futility of attempting to make the delinquent see the matter from any standpoint but her own.

"Well, you know what to do should he propose."

"Oh! he will propose," Nesta affirmed with a little confident smile.

At the door her mother turned.

She lifted an impulsive hand. "You won't for heaven's sake," she insisted, "give the boy an inkling of the truth?"

The beautiful lips curled.

"As though I could be so *gauche!*" she protested. She was plainly offended.

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For all her worldly-mindedness Mrs. Drummond retained that sickened sense throughout lunch. She had no appetite. She ate little beyond the salad garnishing the chicken on her plate. She was glad of the champagne.

Arthur was so fond, so admiring. His dark wide-apart

eyes concentrated upon his charmer with so frank and reverent a delight. He drank to her with his glances. He ate to her with his lips. He blushed and thrilled. He felt himself three times a man for the fire that was in him.

And her mother, observing her methods with clear understanding, was not able to relieve herself of that reptilian impression, of a creature consciously displaying its glittering charm, gliding soft and strong and icy-blooded, fascinating its victim until the moment should come for it to strike.

If she would only be a little brusque with him, snub him, do something to warn him of his fate! she was reflecting. But the girl plied him with intoxicating glances, with soft tones and laughter till he was beside himself.

Mrs. Drummond accompanied them to the drawing-room. She was tempted to remain. A sense of guilt, of dread possessed her. The boy was mad with love. There was no knowing how a refusal might affect him.

She realised, however, that delay would be fruitless. The blow must come.

"My walk in the heat this morning has been too much for me," she said. "I shall lie down for half an hour. Nesta, you can show Arthur your new photographs."

With the rush of a prisoner making for liberty the young man was all at once holding the door for her.

His dancing eyes beamed gratitude. It appeared almost as though he would have kissed her. He could scarcely wait for her to depart.

Long he had sought his opportunity and the mood. But he was young and diffident. And such moments of opportunity as had come had not come when he was in the mood. A man needed courage indeed to propose to a goddess!

Now, however, his opportunity chimed with his mood. Intoxicated by her fascinations he was of a mind to defy the powers of Heaven and Hades.

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!" he cried in thrilling whispers as he closed the door behind his hostess. At last they were alone together.

He made a feint of throwing up his hat. His eyes blazed. His cheeks were slightly flushed with the wine of the grape and with the wine of love.

"Why are you so pleased?" she demanded, lifting her cool eyes to him. "Is it because Mother has gone? It isn't very flattering to her."

He moved with a swift elastic step to where she sat.

"Just now I don't want to flatter her or anybody," he asserted in a trembling voice. A moment and he cast his hesitation to the winds.

"Nesta! I'm mad, I'm glad, I'm crammed with love for you. Such a thing never was before."

He flung himself upon his knees beside her. "I love you, I worship you, I adore you. Be my darling, lovely wife."

His voice broke. "If I were King, Emperor and Czar all in one I should not have enough to offer you. What I have is nothing. I am ashamed to offer it. But I shall make up for it by a world of love."

Cold as she was his impetuosity and heat bore down some of her defences. She trembled a little. She averted her eyes. She found nothing to say.

"You do care a little for me," he cried, encouraged by her silence. "Sometimes I have dared to hope and yet I scarcely dared. Everybody admires you. All men are in love with you. In town I suffered horribly seeing them hold you in their arms at dances, seeing them touch your hand and look at you. Oh, I don't ask you to be in love with me. How could I ask it? I am nobody. Only be kind to me, because I love you. Nesta, say 'Yes,' because I love you so. Nobody else could love you as I do. I feel when I look at you that I could be a Nelson, a Napoleon, everything great and fine for your sake."

He covered her hands with hot kisses. He flung an arm about her and drew her against him. She collected herself. His assault of words and fire was overwhelming. But through it all her head was clear upon her course of action.

She drew away from him with quiet resolution.

"Arthur," she said in an imperative voice, "please let me go. You are rough with me. You frighten me. You take advantage because you are stronger than I am."

In a moment he had set her free. Putting a violent check upon himself he got to his feet and stood beside her, his face white, his hands trembling.

"I am a brute, dear," he said. "I am ashamed, but if you knew how I love you! If you knew how a man feels! And I only kissed your hands. Anybody may kiss hands. It is a sign of reverence. Oh, you must know I did not mean to be rough. I don't know what has come to me. It is like a madness. And your little hands lay there so pink and sweet I loved them and kissed them. They were like a magnet drawing my lips. Nesta," he pleaded, smiling wistfully, "don't blame me; I couldn't help it for the life of me."

He remained looking down upon her ruefully. Her averted face, her evident discomposure, the heightened line of colour, which was all he could see of her cheek, filled him with compunction. Yet at the same time he was experiencing the strange wild pride of a man in being the occasion of her maidenly confusion.

For the moment she was nonplussed. Her social cleverness was of no service to her here. He had abandoned conventional shallows. In attempting to follow him she felt herself out of her depth.

Presently she found words. As she turned her face to speak what he saw there perhaps alarmed him. He tried to forestall her.

"Oh, I will wait—years if you wish it. Nesta, if you cannot say 'Yes' at least do not say 'No.' Perhaps if we leave it you may come to care for me a little."

She exchanged the words at the tip of her tongue for others which his suggested. Despite her vanity and selfishness the fervour he had poured before her, his dark eyes velvet-black with tenderness, his pale face, stirred a sense of shame in her. She caught at words which gave her an opportunity of showing that she made him some return.

"But I do care for you, Arthur," she said, looking up at him. "Of course I like you very much. And though I cannot marry you I think it is just beautiful of you to feel so—so beautifully about me. I am sure it is more than I deserve—really it is. And it is quite charming of you to say such delightful things."

The words came oddly, now halting as though no answer-

her supplied the keynote, now tripping glibly chanced upon accustomed phrases. Her tones and sweetly soprano. Her face wore an expression of surprise. His rapt eyes regarding her with soul in them saw the pretty practised movements of lips, saw that the discomposure of her face was due to conventional embarrassment and was devoid of feeling. Her speech seemed to hiss like cold water dashed upon the hot blood drumming in his ears.

But like the tyro wrestler who is thrown, his fall made a man of him. For a minute he remained staring at her. He seemed turned to stone. Then he gave a little moaning sigh and striding over to a window stood looking out.

Within the space of seconds he and she had changed places. From the attitude of adoring love, looking up from bended knee to his lady leagues above him, he saw himself suddenly a man looking down upon the immaturities of a child.

If love blinds it also reveals. His was the soaring idealism of a first pure love, which differs from some later loves in that it exalts the beauties of the adored one into worshipful qualities of soul and heart instead of merely exaggerating the worshipful qualities of the body.

And a blinding flash of revelation had shown her to him as she was, beautiful in every line and curve and feature, but incapable of even remotely understanding all that he was feeling.

It was a terrible shock. Staring into the garden he saw the trees and grass and rose-trees red. Half of him, his imagination and his higher part, seemed suddenly to have been torn asunder from something to which it had grown. The torn and tender surface of it bled and writhed.

Presently he turned. He looked again at her as she sat gazing mutely before her.

His young impressionable temperament experienced another revulsion. Even though she had failed him in his higher needs—yet her body was so beautiful! He became confused. She was so beautiful sitting there gazing out of wide astonished eyes, the shell pinks of her lovely face made rosy by her excitement, her Love's-bow lips slightly parted.

He forgot his bleeding soul. Or if he remembered it—would not her beauty suffice?

His arms ached for the gentle nestle of her body, his lips craved her lips.

He moved swiftly back to her.

"All the same, dear," he pleaded, but the pride and wild exultancy had vanished from his voice, "won't you be my wife?"

She had no clue to his "All the same." Had she been told she could not have understood the thing that had been revealed to him.

She looked up relieved. One could deal with sanity. And now he was himself again.

"Arthur," she said earnestly, "I am so frightfully sorry. It has all been a mistake. I never thought of such a thing, of course. We have been such excellent friends. But marriage is so different. Perhaps I shall never, never marry. At all events, not for a very long time."

His heart sank again. It was so cheap. How could she have helped knowing that he loved her? And he knew, of course, that girls who pass their lives as she did in the social whirl have marriage for their goal.

"You must have known how much I cared for you," he insisted sullenly. "Don't play with me. Be honest."

He was a wholly different person from the intoxicated glorious lover of some minutes earlier.

"I am not playing. I am quite in earnest," she affirmed. "And really I cannot marry you. I am so sorry about it all. I am used to men liking me and paying me attention, as you know. But one isn't vain enough to suppose they all mean anything."

She dropped her charming lids. She smiled with a becoming modesty. She was once again upon her feet.

"Was I no more, then, than one among the others?" he returned with pain. "We—we got on so well. I thought you were a little more pleased to see me than to see the rest. You always seemed to make a little difference."

"And I always will again when you have come to your senses, you dear silly boy. Come," she cried, springing up lightly, "come, and play tennis and forget all about it."

She had conscience enough to be pricked by his suffering, emotion enough to realise the episode as the most mortifying she had known. She was aware that she had been at a disadvantage and that he had realised it.

"No," he said savagely, "I'm in no mood, of course, for tennis. Have you no heart at all? I must know once for all whether there is any chance for me."

She made a little rueful mouth.

"Why will you make me so unkind? It hurts me to keep saying 'No.'"

"Try 'Yes' then," he suggested drily and drearily. All the light seemed to have gone out of his life.

She was ready with a retort.

"You asked me not to play with you." She smiled and glanced from beneath her lashes. She lifted a fair admonishing finger.

He knew by her voice and by her pretty airs that his case was hopeless. He turned away heart-sick.

He turned back. The flush in his cheeks deepened. His eyes looked strained. Their light and the light on his face were dulled.

"Will you let me kiss you? Nesta, for pity's sake let me kiss you," he petitioned. His voice was like the voice of one athirst.

Now he was talking an intelligible language—one to which she was accustomed.

"Why, of course," she said pleasantly.

She cast down her lashes and put up her face with a pleased expectancy.

"Dear Arthur!" she said softly.

Even then he had the fortitude to turn away. It was all so different from what he had expected. He had brought her a first golden passion. In return she proffered him a—sweetmeat.

However, he turned again. Of course, it was better than nothing. Ah! that sad tumbling from the heights!

His arm went passionately round her. With straining mouth he kissed the smiling lips.

It was by no means her first kiss. But she had never known one so fresh and thrilling.

She gave a little delicious sigh. She leant against him.

"If you would very much like it," she whispered, "you may kiss me again."

He set two muscular young hands upon her shoulders. He gripped her tight and looked into her eyes.

"Darling, be my wife," he implored. "I can't live without you."

She lost no whit of her control. She became serious again. She shook her head.

"How tiresome you are to go back to it," she exclaimed petulantly. "I have said so many 'No's.'"

"Then why do you let me kiss you?"

She shrugged a pretty shoulder out of his grasp. She glanced at him with arch rebuke.

"Do you not like it?"

At all events, he took another and another and some others. Till finally with a choking sob he set her away and rushed from the room.

She sat perturbed. She wished he had remained. Nobody had kissed her before like that. She could feel his lips still cling upon her lips. She lifted her head with a dreamy instinctive desire to be kissed again. But he was gone. She felt strangely stirred. She wondered whether for the first time in her life she was a little in love. Something unwonted ran in her veins. She lay back in her chair with a self-conscious smile. He must kiss her again. It was more amusing than tennis.

She sighed faintly. After all, it was a pity she could not be married to him. He was so very much in love with her. And he kissed so delightfully. It was odd that one kiss should be different from another. Perhaps other men also could kiss as he had done. Her experience had not been wide. Her mother's chaperonage had been strict. Besides, she had learned early that it was injurious to a girl's prospects to make herself cheap.

When she was safely married it would, of course, be different. Married women had very much more freedom.

She ceased to think. She lay dreamily wishing Arthur was there to kiss her again.



## PASSION AND FASHION.

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The door opened. Mrs. Drummond entered in her dressing-gown. Her hair was disordered. Her usually smooth and pleasant face was lined.

"I saw him from the window," she said in an agitated voice. "He seemed to be taking it badly. What did he say? Did he seem much cut up?"

Nesta came out of her dreamy condition vexed. It had been pleasant to dream. She resented being roused. She raised a languid head. She wished to make a sharp retort. But Mrs. Drummond was a woman of personal dignity. She exacted courtesy from her daughter. She curbed herself and answered civilly:

"Yes, he minded a good deal. He seemed to have thought I should be sure to accept him."

Her voice sounded to herself quite far-away. She had brought back only half of her senses. The others still dreamed.

"Did you make him understand? Did he realise that there is no hope?"

"Oh, yes. He understands. I explained fully."

"What is the matter with you?" her mother demanded sharply. "You seem to be half asleep."

"It's so hot—it makes one feel quite drowsy, Mother."

Her mother swept across to her. She stood looking down at her, her full eyes starting with a little horror.

"Have you no feeling at all?" she demanded. "Nesta, of late I have been almost frightened at your heartlessness."

She was mistaking the source of the girl's inattention. It was not so frigidly impersonal, although possibly as selfish, as she supposed.

Nesta drew more of her faculties out of their abstraction. She sat up and faced her mother.

"Why, Mother," she said, "you told me to refuse him. There were reasons why you did not wish me to accept him."

"At all events," her mother protested, "I should like you to feel a little for him. It would seem more natural."

She shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"It would be frightfully vain of me to suppose I mean so much to him," she said, with a smooth laugh.

The elder woman shrugged a pair of shoulders which had once been equally shapely, but were now too plump.

"He is young and excitable," she said with a look of concern. "Did he threaten anything? Did he—" She broke off short. There was dread in her eyes. She trailed a handkerchief over her moist face.

Nesta became all at once alert. She knew in a flash what her mother was fearing.

"Why! You don't think—Oh, you can't think he may do anything—rash?"

"No, no, of course not. He will get over it after a while. But I am sorry about it. I like him."

She walked to the window and stood looking blankly in the direction she had seen him take. Presently Nesta's voice roused her. There were curious notes in it of excitement, of fear, of exultation.

"Mother! If he were by any chance to—do anything rash, you know, do you think people would know it was for my sake?"

The elder woman swung about and fixed a pair of dilated eyes upon her. She was thoroughly unnerved. There had been that in Arthur's disordered gait (and perhaps in her own conscience) to alarm her. Nesta was frightened by her mother's look. She rose and went to her.

Her approach was the last straw. Mrs. Drummond lost her balance. Wildly she threw out her hands and cried hoarsely:

"Oh, keep off. Don't come near me. Don't come near me. I don't know what you are made of." She escaped from the room in a fit of hysterical sobbing.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

## IN THE WOOD.

Except I be by Silvia in the night,  
There is no music in the nightingale ;  
Unless I look on Silvia in the day,  
There is no day for me to look upon.

SIR NIGEL, passing some hours later through a wood, discovered Arthur Colville lying prone upon the grass. At first he supposed him to be sleeping. It was cool and quiet there, and it occurred to him that the young man, fatigued by the heat and possibly by unwonted exercise, had flung himself down for a nap.

He stood still, admiring the slender grace of his young limbs and of his unconscious pose.

He detected a faint convulsive quiver of the trunk. Quietly he left the path, moved without sound across the grass, and bent above him. The young man quivered again and sighed. He broke into a little moan. He muttered under his breath.

With a sudden dread Sir Nigel ran a quick eye over him. He examined the grass around him. His face betokened relief. The careless abandon of the limbs re-assured him. Nothing more serious than emotion was affecting him. He stooped and set a firm and friendly hand upon a shoulder.

"Arthur," he said.

The young man jerked the shoulder vehemently from his grasp.

"Let me alone," he muttered sullenly.

Sir Nigel smiled. He remained looking down upon him. After a minute:

"Are you sure she is worth it?" he submitted whimsically.

The shoulder again jerked. Another shudder coursed down the slender back. A voice mumbled brokenly:

"It's because she isn't."

Sir Nigel ceased to smile. A dew of melancholy came into his eyes. He sat down in the grass beside the sufferer.

"Poor lad!" he said compassionately. Arthur, thus pitied, gulped and sobbed.

"I thought women were so different," he broke out in a burst of misery.

"They are," Sir Nigel said.

It was too subtle for the sufferer's wits to grasp in a moment. When they had done so:

"I mean," he protested peevishly, "I thought the good ones were good and the bad ones bad."

"Ah!" Sir Nigel said. His lips twitched. "You thought the good were all goodness without even a leaven of the devil, and the bad without a white fibre. Human nature is rather more complex, my boy."

"Come, sit up," he added, "and if it will ease you tell me about it."

After a moment Arthur sat up sullenly. He transferred his handkerchief surreptitiously to a pocket. Then, like a schoolboy, he brushed a sleeve across his eyes.

"I suppose you think I've been crying," he observed defiantly.

Sir Nigel did not answer.

"Well, if you must know the truth, I have," the young man blurted. "Call me a fool, if you like."

"I don't call you a fool," Sir Nigel said gravely.

"A schoolboy."

"Men cry."

"They are not discovered crying."

"That is merely an accident," Sir Nigel insisted. He smiled a sweet encouraging smile. He was fond of the youngster. He was saddened by that he saw in his face.

Then his eye was caught by a metallic glinting. He thrust forth a hand and secured a small revolver, which

Arthur in rising had uncovered, and had apparently forgotten.

He looked the youngster sternly in the face.

"I should call you worse than fool or boy," he said, "if I attached any significance to this."

Arthur smiled sheepishly. He stretched out a hand for it. But Sir Nigel transferred it to his pocket.

"You forget it belongs to me," he said. "I lent it to you for legitimate purposes. When you contemplate practising upon yourself you forfeit the loan."

"All right," Arthur grumbled. "Go on at me as much as you like. Kick a man when he is down. I suppose you think I was afraid," he added, a sudden frenzy gleaming in his eyes.

Sir Nigel saw he was in a dangerous mood. He touched his wrist.

"Arthur," he said gently. "You know I like you. I couldn't like a cur."

The young man caught his hand convulsively and gripped it. He broke down utterly and sobbed.

"I wasn't afraid, of course. It wouldn't have been so bad as this. But there was Father. I don't know what he'd do without me."

Sir Nigel let him sob. Then he said kindly :

"In liking you I knew you better than you knew yourself. Seeing what you are to Boisragon—that you are all he has—you would have been a cur to act without considering him. You know he always considers you before himself."

"I know," Arthur admitted, now a mere repentant boy. "And I'm glad I didn't do it. But she refused me. She was as cool and indifferent as though—as though I'd asked her for a dance. And I worshipped her, I idolised her."

He could not see through the back of his head, therefore Sir Nigel, noting his past tenses, felt himself secure in smiling.

In first passion one is in love most of all with the strange and novel enchantment flung by the first experience of sex. The person occasioning the spell, albeit he or she is credited with all the glamour, and believed to be the only being in the world who could arouse it, is more frequently

than not a mere subsidiary factor in the working of a law of nature. Arthur could already speak of his love for Nesta in the past. He had loved—not Nesta—but the conception Nature had set in his mind of Woman.

"It's bad, I know," Sir Nigel said. "But most of us have to go through it."

Arthur sat up again. There was interest in his eyes.

"Were you—do you mind telling me, Sir, if you were ever rejected?"

"I was not rejected perhaps," Sir Nigel answered. "But I was disillusioned—a far worse thing."

"I am both," Arthur said miserably, "rejected and disillusioned. She is incapable of love. She didn't understand. All she said seemed cheap and shallow. And she let me—but I think I won't tell you that."

"No, don't. Men who are worth their salt don't tell things about women."

"Well, I haven't told," the youth said testily. "And," he added, "it would not have hurt, because you don't know her name."

Sir Nigel laughed inwardly. For some months he had known her name.

"She has killed my soul," her victim resumed tragically. "I shall never again believe in women. Beauty is all a lie. She looks like an angel, all feeling and sweetness. And she didn't understand any more than a wax image. She hadn't much more feeling about it than she would have had in refusing me a dance. I was mad with love for her. She had led me on. She said she didn't know. She must have known. How can a woman help knowing when a man is mad for love of her? Why did I go everywhere that she went? Why did I follow her night after night to a round of tiresome places? I gave her flowers and things. I was always there to put on her cloak, to take them to theatres. I drove them to Ranelagh. I rode morning after morning with her in the Row. And then she said she didn't know."

He was working himself once again into a paroxysm of balked passion and anger. His eyes flamed. His chest heaved. His last words came out almost in a scream.

Sir Nigel saw danger in his uncontrol. He realised his excitability and weakness. He got to his feet and stood over him.

"You must not give way like this," he said. "Get up. Let us go for a walk."

"Oh, I can't help it. I must have it out. Go away and leave me to have it out."

Sir Nigel caught his arm.

"Get up," he said firmly. "I shall not leave you here to make a fool of yourself. Everybody has troubles. Even girls bear their troubles quietly. I am ashamed of you."

The young man rose slowly. His graceful limbs dropped limp. His dark, wide-apart eyes were wild and tear-stained. His air was abashed. Then, with the instability of a weak nature, his mood changed suddenly. He frowned and clenched his fists.

"No man shall call me a fool," he protested sullenly. Meeting his friend's quiet glance: "If it had been anyone but you, Sir Nigel—" he mumbled, and became once more dejected.

"That is all right," Sir Nigel said. "You have had a bad blow. It has hurt you. But now make an end of it. Pull yourself together. Don't give way again. See, there is water down there in the hollow. Go and dip your face. You don't want the world to see you've been crying."

Arthur slunk sullenly away. Through the trees the other saw him stoop and lave his face. Then, with a quick, guilty glance round, he suddenly began to walk away.

Sir Nigel followed. His vigorous striding soon brought him up with the fugitive. He dropped into step with an unconcerned air, as though he had not realised the attempt to escape.

"We will go along the cliffs," he said, "and get the breeze. And you shall come in and dine with me. I'm all alone."

Arthur mumbled a protest about clothes.

"Never mind. We will dine like bachelors."

"I shall die a bachelor," the young man protested bitterly.

With his cane Sir Nigel dexterously flicked the heads from a group of thistles.

They strode on in silence, the elder setting a swinging pace. On the cliffs the breeze blew up from the sea, cool and refreshing. Presently Arthur halted, out of breath.

"How you go, Sir," he protested, with a little smile. "I'm quite winded."

"It is nearly dinner-time," Sir Nigel said. He consulted his watch.

"Seven minutes to seven. We must go at a tolerable rate to reach Pentagel by eight."

They went on again in silence. Arthur's face gradually cleared. The air was invigorating. Once he broke into the subdued whistling of a tune. He remembered himself, broke off short and sighed. Suddenly he stopped again.

"By Jove," he said. "I had clean forgotten!"

"What?"

"Why, the Vansittarts. This evening they're coming for a week's visit to us. You know them; you dined with them once at our house. I was to have met them at the station. The Guv'nor *will* be mad."

"Americans? A mother and daughter?"

"Yes. The daughter's an heiress," Arthur said. He added peevishly: "I wish to Heaven they weren't coming. After—what has happened how can I behave as though it hadn't?"

"You can, of course," Sir Nigel said.

He rallied.

"I suppose I can. I shall have to, of course. A man can't wear his heart on his sleeve. But how mad the Guv. will be I didn't meet them! I can't go back with you, Sir Nigel. I must be in to dinner." He took out his watch.

"I say! I shall have to run. Good-bye, Sir." He averted his face and added shyly: "And thank you."

He ran some yards. He returned and stood before his mentor with an air half-defiant, half-abashed.

"Give it to me again," he said, his face flushing. He held out a hand.

Sir Nigel knew what "it" meant. He dipped into his pocket.

"Can I trust you?" he demanded, looking him sternly in the eyes.

"Well, you know," the youth said, with his ingenuous smile. "If I wanted to, a rook-rifle would be good enough for that business."

Sir Nigel returned him the revolver.

"On your honour?" he said seriously.

"On my honour," Arthur repeated, dropping the prize into a pocket. Its possession appeared to restore his self-respect.

"I've had time to think," he said, with a rather lofty air. "I know now that women are not worth it."

His eyes were once more calm. He was recovering some of his buoyancy.

"Now you are talking like a man," Sir Nigel said.

He turned and watched the slender figure in its flannels running lightly out of sight.

"A nice youngster!" he commented, with an indulgent face. "But he needs a firm hand over him."

His eyes were wistful. He stood watching the road from which the slender figure had now disappeared. He sighed and turned homeward.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

## CAMILLA IS SCOLDED.

He has eyes as blue as Summer's heaven.

IN the meanwhile Camilla was living in a seventh heaven. For did not the same roof cover her and her Beloved?

She saw him but little. His morning visits were not lengthy. And then, the delight of his presence, her joy in his voice, her admiration of the fine and clever face, the quick and brief exchange of eyes, were gone. She must wait another four and twenty hours for his return. Whilst he was there her heart was in a tumult, a mist swam between him and her eyes, her pulses throbbing in her ears half-drowned the voice she loved.

When he had gone, she recalled each tone, each word, each look, dwelled upon it, read it this way and that, gave it a thousand meanings and a thousand values.

She wept her pillows wet, realising more and more each day the cruel nature of his bondage. Her tender ears heard the clank of fetters as he returned each morning to his treadmill.

He usually entered cheerful, his step swift and light. He brought with him a little magic storm of force, which set the dull air of the sick-room tingling with life.

Almost always he sent her a swift and subtle glance, penetrating, intimate, yet holding nothing in it of familiarity or approach.

When her eyes showed traces of tears he smiled encourage-



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ment. When they filled with joy his grew grave and reserved.

Sometimes he did not look at her. Then she would sit above her work wounded and mortified. But before he left she would become aware of warring forces in him, would realise that his quarrel was with himself. His moody brow, harsh tones in his voice, filled her with yearning to comfort him. He remained stern and aloof. He moved restlessly about the room. He stood at a window and swept an eagle eye across the Park. Or he would fix an irritable gaze upon the grounds. Sometimes he broke into angry censure of a gardener or keeper, and quitted the room in a hurricane, which boded uncomfortably for the culprit.

One morning she looked up from her work with a little gasp. A whirlwind had seemed to come to a halt beside her. She found him standing near regarding her with quizzical looks. His skin was clear and ruddy, his eyes of a magnetic blue. He seemed charged with vitality and health.

"How you sit there day after day," he broke out, "with your remorseless scissors. One might take you for Atropos perpetually snipping the dull threads of countless lives."

She smiled faintly.

"I am only cutting lint," she defended herself.

"How many miles of lint do you cut in a week? I imagine you travelling day and night along an endless road of it."

She shook her head. A faint sweet colour stole into her cheeks under the magnetic dominance of his eyes.

"I only cut it in the mornings. I keep it for your visits. It is quiet work and does not disturb you while you are reading."

"You would not have me lose one iota of my joy," he submitted with a savage irony.

Impulsively she stretched out a sympathetic hand.

"Oh, I am sorry," she cried, in a low voice. "I sit here and am grieved from the depths of my heart."

His eyes fixed themselves upon the strong white hand. They filled with an iron resistance. Yet his face was tortured.

"Keep your compassion, my Camilla, for your own case,

who spend your hours in shaping bandages and abominations," he retorted sardonically. "I will have none of it. And take back your foolish hand to its snippings. Why do you do these things?" he broke out with a sudden fierceness.

"What things?" she inquired amazed. "What have I done?"

"What have you done? Are you a child or a woman? Why do you tempt me with your compassionate hand? Suppose I were to take it and kiss it and keep it?"

She withdrew it with a gesture of alarm.

"No! No!" she said.

"No! no!" he mimicked. "But suppose it should be 'Yes! yes?'"

She lifted her head. She faced him with spirit. She half smiled.

"You forget I am a woman, not a child," she said, with steady eyes.

"No," he insisted. "I remember that you are a woman, very much of a woman. It is you who forget," he continued, his tones dropping into honeyed sweetness. "Are you not forgetting that I have held you to my heart?"

"No," she said.

"And if I should suddenly take you again to my heart do you think you could resist me?"

"Yes," she said.

"'No' and 'Yes'!" he cried. "What barriers are these between a man and woman, between the stress of two unconquerable souls? between you and me, Camilla?"

For a minute she was silent. Then:

"They represent the will of those unconquerable souls," she maintained sturdily. "They stand for the strength of you and of me," she added gently.

He made a little motion of rejection.

"Yet, if I should put my 'Yes' against your 'No,' my strength against your strength? How then, my Camilla, with the compassionate hands and tender eyes? My Camilla who has lain at my heart. My Camilla who has let me kiss her. Who," his voice resumed its poignant sweetness, "has said the most exquisite things to me?"

Her face flooded with crimson. Her head sank, as though bowed by the weight of the tender tide.

"I entreat you to forget," she besought him. "I never thought there would be an afterwards in which to remember."

"You blush," he said. "Are you ashamed? Don't be ashamed, dear. There is nothing shameworthy in honest love. Dear, I found only lovely purity upon your lips, only nobility in your soul. I am a wretch to make you blush. And yet it is sweet to make you blush so sweetly. Your white modesty has a celestial savour. Ah, if you could only be mine! If you could only be mine, Camilla. Will any other man know to be so tender with your celestial modesty?"

Tears gushed from her eyes, drawn by the yearning in his voice. She dared not look at him, to find in his face the pain she heard in his voice.

Gradually she forced control. She dried her eyes and lifted them to him. They were ringed by wet lashes, starlike with tears.

"You are too generous to remember," she appealed, "when I so wish you to forget. The circumstances—"

"Don't," he cried. "For Heaven's sake don't reduce us to circumstances. Let us have no miserable conventions between you and me. Listen, Camilla. I shall never forget. It is absurd to suppose I should allow myself—even were it possible—to forget the best thing in my life. You ask me to be generous. Is it generous of you to wish to take my best possession from me?"

"Oh, I am glad," she broke out passionately, "I am glad if I have been able to give you something that you value."

He eyed her ruefully. He shook his head. He drew a rapid breath, and stepped some paces from her.

"You are a very dangerous woman," he said, smiling slightly, "because you do not know when you are dangerous. And that sometimes makes—trouble, my dear." He resumed whimsically, "You must curb this bad habit of yours of letting your heart bolt, of offering the white temptations of your hands—just at the wrong moment, Camilla—at the wrong moment. For, after all, you know, a man is no more than a man."

"But you," she cried, "seem to me so much more than any other man that I cannot think of you as being no more."

"Ah, dear," he said, and sighed. "Don't believe it. Don't trust me. I am only like the others."

He hardened his face. He stepped back the paces he had retreated. He stood above her smiling bravely.

"Now then," he said. "We have once and for ever proved our mettle. Let us shake hands courageously with those two renegades who ought to have been drowned the other night, but who will keep popping up their heads."

She became infected by his chivalrous gaiety. Their eyes glistened upon one another with frank affection. She rose and put her hand in his. He pressed it in a friendly, inspiring grip.

"And now to your snippings!" he insisted. "But on peril of your life, cut the poor threads of those two souls. In reality, do you know, you should not snip. You should weave. Have you heard of Penelope's web?"

"Yes," she said, meeting his quizzical glances.

"And you know she kept weaving persistently in order to ward off importunate suitors."

"Yes," she said, still meeting his glances, now with a defiant little smile.

"So, do you not think you should take to weaving?"

"No," she replied, "my snippings will serve."

He laughed shortly. His eyes gleamed. It was plain her spirited retort delighted him.

He still lingered.

"What is it you are so busy upon?"

"Dressings."

He looked shocked. The light went out of his face. He swept a glance upon the soft, shaped lengths. He turned away with an angry sigh.

"Did I not tell you this is a fool world," he cried vehemently, "when you, who were made for the noblest, tenderest conditions, should be cramped and chained in the service of disease."

He glanced with avoidant eyes up the room to the couch whence an occasional senseless moaning broke upon their talk.

"You are wrong," she said. "I am not cramped and chained. I confess I may have been in hospital, where there was nothing but routine. But not here in this beautiful place—not here in this beautiful place. All lives must have service and duty in them. I am glad to be of use in the world."

His eyes dwelled on her, on the light and enthusiasm of her face. His ears drank her voice.

"Poor Camilla!" he returned. He smiled upon her fervour. "She is so sincere in her convictions. And she does not realise that the misapplication of power is abuse, not use."

He quitted the room.

Mrs. Drummond sent a little note inviting Camilla to pay her a visit. "I have been bothered," she wrote. "Something has happened. Come this afternoon for tea and a talk."

Before Camilla had had time to stir the sugar into her tea, she had learned the something that had happened. Nesta had gone out golfing with the Trevescan girls and boys (and, no doubt, with the Trevescan matron). Cousin Caroline was able, therefore, to talk unreservedly.

"Of course, you will not say a word," she enjoined Camilla. "There were reasons why Nesta should refuse him, reasons of policy. They are so very poor, you know. And, although the name is unexceptionable, Nesta is sure to do better. She would never make a poor man's wife. It would only mean unhappiness to both."

Camilla maintained an uncompromising mien. She did not allow her cousin's apologies, though proffered in a voice of graceful feeling, to influence her in the least.

"I think the young man has been shamefully treated," she insisted, "if you ask my opinion. You have not, but there it is, and nothing will alter it. It is absurd to speak of him as though he were a curate or a struggling doctor. He offers Nesta a title and a fine position. He is an honourable, charming young man. He adores her. I hope you and Nesta have the grace to be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves."

"Goodness!" Mrs. Drummond cried. "What has come to you? You talk and look like a spitfire. After all, it cannot affect you?"

"I am sorry for him. When I saw them together, I thought his devotion was beautiful."

"Oh, well," the other said, but she avoided Camilla's eyes, and had lost some of her persistent pleasant composure, "he is very young. At that age it is little more than calf love. He thought Nesta an absolute angel. I believe he had a notion there were wings tucked somewhere away in her bodice. It was absurd, of course. He was bound to have a fall. And, for my part, I think a refusal will prove the most kind."

"I don't agree with you," Camilla said. "His devotion might have put a heart into her. She will not easily find so charming a young man."

"Well, don't scold," her cousin deprecated rather pitifully. "The truth is I am frightfully sorry myself. But there was no alternative. If you knew all the facts you would see that we are not wholly to blame."

She sighed regretfully.

Camilla relaxed her countenance. "Well, it is useless to enlarge upon it; I suppose it is irrevocable."

"Oh, quite."

"And I suppose you will be leaving Gweal Court," she submitted, with a dry smile.

"Not yet. Nesta needs rest and change. The air suits her. And Arthur really seems to be taking it well. They have the Vansittarts—the American millionaires, you know—at the Castle. Lord Boisragon, no doubt, intends Arthur to marry the daughter. Well! If Mrs. Vansittart chooses!" She swept out her hands. "It is her affair—not mine."

Camilla shook her head.

"I, for one, should not consider her an object of pity," she retorted. "Nor need anybody."

"Um, um," Mrs. Drummond buzzed, faithfully remembering her word of honour, although, if the truth must be told, she was dying to justify her action in her cousin's eyes.

"At all events, for the present, Arthur has Mamie Vansittart to console him. He seems cheerful enough. She

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is a lively, amusing girl. It would not be easy to mope in her company. The other day Nesta and I met them on the road. Arthur, at first, looked unutterable things, but before we parted he and Nesta were on terms again. Nesta behaved admirably. She really has a perfect social talent."

"Is Miss Vansittart beautiful?"

"Not beautiful, but quite pretty enough. She dresses well and wears her clothes with an air. She is smart, a bright talker, and has tact, as all these American girls have. Nesta, of course, put her in the shade. But then she puts most girls in the shade. Her style is unique."

"Hearts in rebound have made a proverb," Camilla said. "Miss Mamie's visit, perhaps, is well-timed for poor Mr. Arthur's wounded feelings."

"Well, it would be a satisfactory conclusion—for him, at all events. The girl, they say, will have a quarter—if not half—a million. Pounds, I mean, Camilla, not dollars. And the Boisragon resources need it."

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## THE TREHERNES.

Custom is the brick wall against which feeble minds come to a standstill and hinder the progress of the world.

CAMILLA, returning leisurely in the hot July afternoon, enjoying every moment of a walk between luxuriant hedgerows, starred with wild flowers and divinely perfumed, was overtaken by Mr. Treherne and his daughter, also walking.

She had met them once since the occasion of the dinner-party at Pentagel, on an afternoon when they had been calling at Gweal Court. According to Miss Hanson, gossip smiled significantly, coupling the pleasant widow's name with that of the widower. The corners of the pleasant widow's agreeable mouth had curved complacently when Camilla laughingly repeated the gossip.

Camilla herself had detected no whit of sentiment in his demeanour. But he was one of those singularly reserved and secretive men whom the experienced suspect of harbouring sentiment for a particular person from the mere fact that their demeanour to that particular person is markedly devoid of sentiment.

Camilla had taken a liking to Miss Treherne. She was warm-hearted and candid and high-spirited. This afternoon she looked exceptionally pretty in a frock of cool green chiffon, which set off her graceful rounded figure, a broad hat shading her face.

She was paler than usual. In her fine eyes lurked a certain wistfulness. Camilla suspected from what she had



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seen and heard that Arthur Colville was the cause of it.

She had returned from town with a loss of her high spirits and that new wistfulness in eyes which had previously been all gaiety and sparkle.

She greeted Camilla cordially. All walked on together, the two women chatting in friendly fashion, Mr. Treherne a little in the rear. Camilla felt his eyes scrutinising her. Now and again he glanced with sudden sharp interrogation into her face, as though to find some hidden meaning in a simple observation she had made. Or he put test questions in an indifferent voice, then searched her face for their effect.

He was a born detective. Yet it appeared that he made no use of the intelligence he gleaned or believed himself to have gleaned. He had never been known to gossip or to concern himself actively about his neighbours' affairs. It was curiosity pure and simple, a species of psychological kleptomania. He found it impossible to keep his wits from picking and stealing his neighbours' secrets. But, like other kleptomaniacs, he made no use of the properties he had purloined.

He was still employed upon the puzzle Camilla had presented to him that first evening of their acquaintance. He craved to pick her mental pocket of the real reason of her calling. So charming a woman he was convinced must have had an ulterior motive in becoming a nurse.

So he lingered a little behind, now and then stealing into the conversation. It was as though he hoped to discover a corner of that he sought suddenly appearing from a pocket of it. In which event he was prepared to pounce upon and appropriate it.

"I suppose you will be leaving Camelcarbis presently, Miss Braeburn?" he submitted.

Camilla turned, astonished. His shining eyes were full upon her, a little arch of white showing between the iris and the lid.

"I have no such intention," she said. "Why do you suppose it?"

"Do you not then permit yourself a vacation?" he sub-

mitted blandly. "Are you so keen upon your profession that you go on working all the year round without a break?"

"You meant only for a holiday?" she said, relieved. The suggestion of leaving Pentagel had disturbed her. "I came here for a rest after some hard years in a London hospital. One should not need vacation from this lovely air."

"You do not like the notion of leaving Pentagel?"

His eyes had gathered so much.

"Not at all," she answered. "I am very happy there."

She was aware that for some inexplicable reason he was trying to discover something from her. Instantly she became upon her guard. Her voice betrayed a shade of constraint.

Had he not been walking behind her she would have seen a sudden gleaming in his gaze. He detected the constraint. She *was* concealing something then. The corner of the clue had peeped. He was rewarded.

He rubbed his long cold hands together silently. His face showed gratification. He quickened his pace and walked abreast of them. Part of his idiosyncrasy was to conceal it. He had discovered enough for one day. He had discovered there was something to discover. He must not arouse her suspicion. He must wait for another occasion. He joined pleasantly in the conversation. He re-mitted the labours of his probing eyes.

"I don't think Arthur Colville is looking well," Gwendolen observed, trying to keep special interest out of her voice, yet unable to repress her longing to speak of him. "Do you?" she inquired of Camilla. "Perhaps you have not seen him lately. Perhaps he has not been so much to Pentagel since the Vansittarts have been at the Castle."

"I know very little of what goes on at Pentagel," Camilla said. "You see, I am nearly always with Lady Harland."

"Do you admire American girls?" Gwendolen appealed rather eagerly. "Miss Vansittart is clever and pretty, I think, and her frocks are lovely. But she is not beautiful like Nesta Drummond."

"I have not seen her," Camilla said.

"She—all the Castle party were at church on Sunday morning. And I thought then that Arthur looked quite ill."

"Oh, he's fit enough," her father insisted. "Young men

ought to be lean. Now old Boisragon if you like—not that he is so old—looks as though he's going to pieces. His face is puffy and wrinkled. I don't at all like his appearance."

"People get into the habit of living," Camilla said. "My experience in hospital has taught me never to suppose a person is going to die or even to be ill for no better reason than that he does not look well."

"It is true," he agreed. "It is the old story of the 'creaking gate.' Lady Harland, for example. There is a case in point. She's been at death's door these fifteen years. Yet you'll find she'll outlive a good many of us. Eh! Miss Braeburn?"

So clever was he in finding clues that he wholly missed Camilla's shocked and startled look. The fate of the man she loved was so bound up in his prophecy that she was unable to conceal the emotion it occasioned. But that Camilla had taken any special interest in Sir Nigel was not one of his preconceived notions. Therefore, his search-light eyes perceived nothing singular in her expression.

"Lady Harland has been quite well of late," she said, controlling her voice. "In the spring she failed a little. But she has quite recovered."

"It really is a marvellous case. I remember her illness. Life hung on a thread. Then Sir Oliver operated. It is miraculous what science can do now-a-days."

"But, Father," Gwendolen objected earnestly. "Was it really a gain? She does not enjoy life or understand things. She suffers pain. She is a constant care and anxiety to everybody about her. Would it not have been better for the poor thing to have died? If it had been I—I would a thousand times rather have preferred to pass quietly away."

"Oh, nonsense," her father protested with a superior air. "It must always be a benefit to prolong life. Ask Miss Braeburn."

Camilla was glad that Gwendolen did not seek further opinion. In her position as nurse she preferred not to be called upon to criticise the methods of the more scientific branch of medical art.

Presently their ways parted.

As they shook hands:

"Oh, I wish you would come to see us," Miss Treherne invited her impulsively. "It would be so delightful. Don't be formal about calls. If I were to call upon you at Pentagel I might be interrupting you at a busy time. But do come. We are always in on Monday. Father, tell Miss Braeburn how delighted we shall be to see her."

"We shall, I am sure," Mr. Treherne said courteously, but not cordially.

Camilla realised that he did not approve of his daughter's invitation. She showed no sign. She thanked them smiling and went her way.

"You should not have asked her to come," Mr. Treherne told Gwendolen. "After all, she is only an attendant employed by our friends."

"But, Father, she is a lady, and so beautiful and cultured. I am quite in love with her. There is a charming distinction about her."

"I find no fault with her personally," Mr. Treherne said dispassionately. "It is merely that her position makes social amenities awkward. For example, if Sir Nigel should meet her at his friends' houses he would be compelled, of course, to treat her on equal terms."

"I am sure he is much too nice and highly bred to think of treating her on any other terms wherever he meets her," Gwen retorted indignantly.

"Oh, well," her father said, "girls don't understand everything. And I am sure Sir Nigel would prefer not to be placed awkwardly with regard to her, seeing her position in the house. It is not as though she were suited to such a position—like Miss Hanson for instance."

Gwen stopped and gazed at him out of her candid eyes. She broke into a ringing laugh.

"Dear old Father!" she cried, catching affectionately at one of his hands. "How you do love to make mysteries and situations!"

"Do I, my dear," he said. He held her hand. His staring eyes softened. He smiled good-humouredly upon her. "Perhaps I do. Ask her if you like, Gwenny. She is really very nice. And she is, moreover, a cousin of the Drummonds—persons of assured position."



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## THE KEY OF THE ESCRITAIRE.

Conscience is harder than our enemies,  
Knows more, accuses with more nicety.

ARRIVED at Pentagel Camilla found the house in confusion. Benson was distracted.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Nurse Braeburn," she cried. "I'm nearly driven out of my mind. Directly you'd gone her ladyship started screaming at the top of her voice. It goes through you like a knife. She's kept it up without a moment's rest, screaming and tearing her lace into rags. That new tea-gown too! Sir Nigel is out. And nobody knows where to find him."

"What is the trouble?" Camilla asked.

She was compelled to raise her voice almost to a shout in order to make Benson hear. The invalid lay back upon her couch uttering ear-splitting shrieks. Her eyes were closed. She was beating the key in her hand distressfully against an arm of the couch. The beautiful lace of her gown hung in shreds.

"Oh! Heaven only knows the whys and wherefores! She's got some notion or another. It seems to be about the escritaire. Before she shut her eyes she was staring all the while at it and holding out the key as though she wanted it opened."

As she had done before, Camilla raised her in her arms and, carrying her over to the bureau, stopped before it.

The screaming continued, till suddenly she opened her eyes. In a moment she was quiet. With a murmur of joy

she jerked her body forward. Her shaking hand lifted and fumbled helplessly at one of the little painted doors. She was trying to fit the key, despite the fact that it was enclosed in a bag. Benson took it from her to release the key. The moment it was out of her hand she recommenced screaming. When it was returned to her she became once more quiet and began again to fumble at the door. She might have tried for ever. The hand had neither sense to place nor force to use the key. Camilla quietly guided her hand to the lock. The key slipped in. The poor thing gave an exultant gasp.

Suddenly she realised that Camilla was there, that it was she who had fitted the key. In a moment her cunning was in arms. She turned her head and stared the nurse in the face. Then, as though in anger at finding herself watched, she dragged at the key and pulled it from the lock. In a sudden paroxysm she struck Camilla in the face with it.

It was a small thing and her blow was nerveless, but it cut into the cheek.

She would have struck again had not Benson, who was standing near, immediately caught her hand.

"Oh, how wicked you are!" she cried. "Your ladyship is a naughty bad thing to behave so."

As she struggled and fought, Camilla, staggering beneath the difficult burden, carried her back to the couch.

Immediately she recommenced to scream, more vehemently and wildly than before.

"She's made you bleed. Such a nasty cut as she's given you! I hope it won't mark. Oh, you bad, naughty lady," Benson cried beside herself with nervousness, adding the protest of her scolding to the piercing shrieks. "What in the world are we to do with you?"

At this moment a knock came upon the door. Sir Nigel entered.

"What is it? What is this?" he demanded, advancing to the group.

Camilla's wounded cheek attracted his quick eye.

"You are hurt," he said. "What has happened?"

Before she had time to explain:

"Did she do it?" he demanded savagely, turning upon



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the patient. His eyes flamed. The senseless screaming well-nigh deafened them. Then his face saddened. His eyes dulled.

"Ah, poor wretch!" he said, half in scorn, half in pity.

"Please attend to yourself," he bade Camilla authoritatively as she, with a handkerchief to her face to staunch the oozing, continued her attempts to soothe the invalid.

As she did not obey:

"Nurse," he insisted sharply. "Pray do at once what is necessary to the cut on your cheek." He turned. "I will send immediately for Brattleton."

"No, no," Camilla protested. "It is quite unnecessary. It is nothing at all."

To satisfy him she folded a little pad of lint and standing before a mirror strapped it tightly upon the wound.

Having finished she looked up to find his eyes fixed upon her with a fierce dejection. "I am infinitely sorry," he said. He seemed cruelly humiliated.

Camilla went over to him.

"You exaggerate the seriousness," she insisted firmly. "Really it is nothing. Wounds on the face heal very quickly. It will be well in a day or two. Please, please do not vex yourself about it."

"I am infinitely ashamed," he said. There were sorrow, mortification, anger, contempt in his voice.

Then they turned their attention to their clamorous charge.

"I will tell you what I think," Camilla said earnestly. "For months she has been troubling about the *escritaire*. She is sure there is something of importance in it—"

"I believe there is nothing at all in it," Sir Nigel interposed.

"At all events," Camilla urged, "it would be best to show her there is nothing in it, or to let her take what she wants from it."

"Good!" he said.

Without heeding her re-doubled shrieks he gently worked the key out of her clenched hand. He gave it to Camilla. Then he caught up the invalid and carried her over to the bureau. She seemed to guess what was intended. She opened her eyes. She ceased to scream.

"Open the door," he instructed Camilla.

She slipped in the key.

Immediately the invalid uttered another heart-rending scream and began to beat her hands together. The key turned with difficulty. All the while she struggled as though personal violence were being done to her. The door at last sprang open.

As Sir Nigel had said, there was nothing within. Camilla at his injunction opened the other cupboard. That too was empty.

He held the patient close to it. She ceased to struggle. She craned her neck. Her eyes peered eagerly. She ran them with a ghastly eagerness over every portion of the interior.

Then, as though all at once forgetting what she sought, or that she had sought anything, she became dull and uninterested. She stared about her. She stared at Sir Nigel. She seemed to be dazed at finding herself in his arms. Finally she dropped her head forward on her breast in a half-stunned stupefied fashion. A reaction of apathy had succeeded upon her excitement.

He bore her back to the couch. She lay there without sound or movement, her eyes closed. But that her obscured mind had received some definite impression was shown by the fact that the hand which for months had remained clenched upon the key now lay limply open. She did not again ask for it.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

## ARTHUR HEARS GOSSIP.

Moral qualities rule the world, but at short distances the senses are despotic.

LORD BOISRAGON sat in the library silently rubbing his large soft hands. Before him on a table lay some legal-looking documents, together with sundry sheets of paper on which he had apparently been doing sums. The symbols standing for pounds and dollars were scattered freely over them. Some of the totals ran into so many as ten figures. These were where the symbol for the dollar reigned. Where the sign denoting pounds sterling predominated, however, his totals numbered half-a-dozen figures. And half-a-dozen figures mean, as the financier knows, sufficiently gratifying results.

At all events they gratified this one. For having arrived at them he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands slowly and softly together as though he felt a portion of his totals already between his palms.

He was alone. Arthur had gone to the station with the Vansittarts, they having that morning concluded their visit to the castle.

Before they had left, Lord Boisragon and Mrs. Vansittart had had a little talk, much to the point and satisfactory to both. While they talked Arthur and Mamie Vansittart had strolled about the quaint Dutch garden which Mrs. Drummond had recently admired to so little purpose. While they talked they could see the two young people passing to and fro before the windows.

It is unnecessary to give the details of their confabulation. One of the results was that as Mrs. Vansittart left the castle in the shabby brake (Arthur and Mamie, the one opposite and the other beside her, carrying on an amusing duet of chatter and laughter) she ran a pleased eye over the stately outlines of the massive exterior and reflected that some of Mamie's dollars would be well laid out in repairing the dilapidations of the interior. The other results of the confabulation were Lord Boisragon's sum-totals.

As for Arthur. He stood on the platform, his dark eyes bright with animation, his mobile face wreathed with smiles, rallying spiritedly to pretty Mamie's lively sallies. But as the train steamed out of the station, and the travellers passed from view, they passed also from his mind.

His face clouded. He sighed. Dejectedly he remembered Nesta. Nothing was of any use! He should always remember Nesta. It was more than a week since she had so heartlessly flouted him. Yet here she was as fresh in his mind as the day she had done so!

It was true Mamie Vansittart was a nice girl, pretty and lively and amusing. In her company he had scarcely known a dull hour. Despite his desperate state, he had enjoyed their visit. The lonely castle would be lonelier without them. And yet the moment they had gone, so indelible and faithful was his devotion that his heart returned at once to Nesta. So he self-consciously reflected.

He had been a little ashamed of finding so much diversion in Mamie's society, considering the shattered state of his affections. He was pleased with himself now when he found his devotion unchanged. He lighted a cigarette and walked home gloomily, seeing himself with much commiseration as a man whose life was to be sacrificed to an unrequited and, he feared, an unworthy love.

At the door he was told that his lordship requested his presence in the library. He repaired thither listlessly. Nesta's cruelty had damped the warmth even of his affection for his father.

Lord Boisragon rubbed his hands again as his son entered. "Well, old chap," he greeted him cheerfully. "Glum



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because you've lost your charmer! It isn't for ever, you know. They are coming again presently. Look here! I've got some nice little figures for you. I had a talk with the old lady."

"Figures be hanged!" Arthur protested sulkily. He flung himself into a chair beside a window and helped himself to another cigarette. He would not look at the paper his father extended to him.

"What is the matter?" Boisragon demanded blankly.

"Matter!" Arthur echoed. "Matter enough I should think." He stood up and announced with tragic impressiveness, "I suppose you're not aware, Sir, that I am a rejected man, a heart-broken man, a ruined man." His lip quivered. His voice broke. His face was tremulous with feeling.

"The deuce! When did it happen? Why, only this morning Mrs. Vansittart assured me—"

"Oh I'm not thinking of the Vansittarts. I don't care a hang for the Vansittarts, although of course I was civil to them. A man can't wear his heart on his sleeve. I don't suppose you guessed anything was wrong. No doubt you've been thinking me a boy without a trouble in the world. But I'm a man, Sir. And a man of the world has got to grin and bear things. A wrecked life is standing before you."

It sounded melodramatic, but he was quite sincere. His face was pale and unhappy.

Lord Boisragon guessed now what had happened. But he had no intention of disclosing his part in the catastrophe. He rose and crossed the room.

"What is it, lad?" he said affectionately. He put a large soft hand upon the young man's shoulder.

Arthur broke down. He turned away and buried his face in his sleeve. He was but a spoilt boy.

"It's Nesta Drummond, Father," he cried hoarsely. "She rejected me—last week. And—and I'm so fond of her."

A half-smile flickered over his father's heavy face. Quietly he shrugged his shoulders. His hand took a firmer grip.

"Never mind," he said. "You'll get over it. The girl's a stick and she won't have more than a beggarly few thousands. She's as cold and selfish as a fish. Mamie Vansittart is

worth a dozen of her. And listen, boy," he added eagerly. "I've been going into the figures. With what she'll bring and what I can give you, there will be nearly half-a-million for you."

"Father, I don't care about it," Arthur cried impetuously. "It's Nesta I want. She's so beautiful. I can't live without her."

"Looks are only skin-deep, Arthur. Take my word for it. I know a little about women, and she's not the sort to make any man happy. She's a cold-hearted, selfish little jade. That's what she is."

This was going too far.

With a death-dealing glance Arthur arose from his chair and stalked to the door.

"If any other man had dared to call her names I'd have dashed his damned words down his throat," he broke out in a fury. He went out.

The elder man stood staring after him, a half-frightened, half-wistful expression on his ugly face. Then he laughed sardonically.

"Who'd have thought a son of mine—and hers—would take a love-affair so seriously?" he muttered. "It's a queer world!"

He returned to the table and sat staring at his figures, the old abstraction in his eyes. Presently he folded the papers neatly and locked them into a desk. His face looked old. He went to a sideboard, poured himself half a tumbler of brandy and tossed it off.

Arthur did not put in an appearance until dinner-time. He was peevish and fretful. He scarcely ate. He gave his father short answers. He wore airs of injury.

Lord Boisragon, out of his strong affection for him, was patient and forbearing, although control came difficult to him. He reflected that the boy must have time to get over his disappointment.

Three evenings later he came in to dinner, his eyes wild, his hands trembling. He walked with a slight unsteadiness. There was a cut on his forehead.

"Been fighting?" his father suggested, pointing playfully to it.

"Yes," Arthur said with so much savagery that the subject was forthwith dropped.

Throughout the meal he spoke little. When he did it was to make curt, laconic answers, sometimes with no application to the remark preceding them.

Boisragon looked up several times to find his son's eyes glaring at him. He drank a great deal too much wine. As the meal proceeded his tongue became loosed. He talked fast and loud. His tone grew contemptuous, bullying.

After a terse rebuke from his father for some exceptional brusquerie he sat morose again and silent, staring before him.

Boisragon watched him with attention. Informed by affection he became aware that something fresh had happened. The boy had been regaining his spirits, had shown signs of weathering his rejection. Now, however, it was plain there was a new source of disquietude.

When the two were alone Arthur suddenly confronted him with burning eyes.

"I've been amusing myself in the village," he said with a hard laugh. "There are pretty girls there. After all women are some use in the world except to ruin men's lives. You won't find me being a fool of a monk any longer. Why didn't you set me sooner to amuse myself. Eat, drink and be merry for to-morrow we die, say I—now."

"Pooh!" his father said indifferently, relieved if this were to prove the explanation of the fresh turn of things. "Amuse yourself if you like. Only don't make a fool of yourself. And don't make a scandal."

Arthur laughed horridly.

"God," he cried, "what does it matter? What does anything matter that happens to a—"

He got unsteadily to his feet, lurching against the table. He was more than half intoxicated. He poured himself another glass of wine. He leaned across the board and with an insolent flippancy, spilling wine freely as he did so, he filled his father's glass.

"Now," he cried hoarsely. "I'll give you a toast. You shall drink to my toast, Guv. You'll find it a good one.

Stand up Guv.,” he almost shouted. “Stand up and drink to my toast. Here then I give you—” he paused, his blood-shot eyes rolling insanely:

“A fool of a bastard who had the impudence to propose to the loveliest girl in the world!”

He raised his glass as though to drink. But as it touched his lips he suddenly flung it from him on the floor. It broke with a little startling crash into a mass of shattered glass and wine like blood stains.

He threw himself back into his chair, flung his arms forward on the table and dropped his head upon them.

Lord Boisragon’s intuition had warned him aright. When the shock came he was ready for it.

He became deathly white. He winced at the sounds of his son’s gasping breath. He sat motionless and without saying a word. His heavy eyes looked past the heaving head and shoulders, like eyes which saw fate bearing swiftly down upon him. He cursed the untoward chance that had precipitated this news so close upon the youngster’s other trouble.

When Arthur had lain for a minute head forward on the table, his father rose quietly and going round set a hand upon his arm.

The youth shuddered with repulsion or with anger.

“Arthur,” Boisragon said. “The story you have heard is an accursed lie. Where did you hear it? Who told it to you?”

The young man lifted his face. It was grief and shame blurred. His wide-apart eyes gleamed angrily.

“I heard it in an alehouse,” he said bitterly. “He taunted me with it. Even the girls sneered. But I beat his senseless head more senseless still against the table. I’d have killed him if they hadn’t got him away from me.”

“Who? who?” Lord Boisragon demanded impatiently. “You say ‘he’ as though I knew.”

“How do I know who he was. Some lout from the fields with clay on his boots. He came in and saw his girl on my knee. He flew into a rage and taunted me. And I could see they all knew it was true.”

A shiver ran over the elder man. Coarse-fibred as he

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was, he was, as are most men of family, sensitive upon the point of family honour. His heavy frame appeared to lose bulk.

"Why did you go to such a place?" he said savagely. "I can't have you making scandals here. It will be all over the county."

Arthur laughed contemptuously.

"Do you think they don't all know it? I was the only wretched idiot who never suspected. And I should have guessed if I hadn't been a blind fool, seeing the mystery you've always made of—my mother." He lifted a clenched hand. "Whoever she was, wherever she is, alive or dead," he cried in alcoholic rage, "I curse her for putting such a shame on me. Who has a right to shame a poor wretch before he's even born? Why didn't you strangle me, and not let me grow up to be a laughing-stock. How can I show my face anywhere? No wonder Nesta despised me. My God! I wonder she didn't spit in my face. The nameless son of—I suppose—some nameless creature to dare to ask her to marry him." He broke down in a burst of hysterical sobbing.

Fate had been hard on him, poor youth! Within the space of days his pride and young assurance had been brought low indeed. His father let him sob awhile. Then:

"Arthur," he said in a rough peremptory voice, "sit up and listen to me. I swear to you before God and man the whole thing is a lie. On my oath I swear you are my lawful son and heir. I tell you I swear it before God and man."

"Then why do they say what they do? Why do you let them say it? Why don't you ram the lie down their cursed throats and prove the truth?"

"If you won't believe me," his father retorted savagely, "don't. I tell you the thing is a lie from beginning to end. I swear you are my legitimate son, born in lawful marriage."

"Still, I suppose my mother was some—creature," Arthur said drearily, "or they'd never have dared to say what they do."

"To hell with them and their lies!" his father cried ferociously. "They know nothing at all. Your mother was a woman of family—a peer's daughter."

Arthur flung up his face.

"Guv. ! is it true? Guv. ! swear it's true," he cried excitedly. "I couldn't stand the shame, and for Nesta to know. Shame's horrible."

"I swear it's true," his father said. He looked at his son's drawn face. He seemed to look beyond it into the past. "Thank God it's true," he muttered to himself.

He shuddered throughout his heavy frame. One might have supposed that recollection carried him back to the brink of a precipice.

Arthur sprang up. In a revulsion of feeling he caught his father's hand and pressed his burning lips to it.

"Father, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said, choking with boyish repentance. "I was mad. No wonder I was mad. If you knew what I've suffered. I couldn't have lived to be a laughing-stock. I was so proud we'd come in to the title."

The shock of joy sobered him. He threw off the effects of the wine he had taken. A reactionary exultation swung up his young spirit high and dry from the lees in his blood.

"Wait till to-morrow," he cried boastfully. "I'll ram every one of their lies down their throats. And first I must tell Nesta. But how can I say such a thing to a girl? Guv. you must do it. You must tell Mrs. Drummond in the morning, prove to her the whole thing is a lie. But how did they ever come to say it?"

"People don't need excuses for lying," his father said sullenly.

He added: "We can't go quite so fast, Arthur. You have my word. Let the fools talk. Keep away from them. If you want amusement go to town. You shall have a cheque in the morning. But don't for God's sake make scandals and disgrace us in our own place."

"Mrs. Drummond must be told to-morrow," Arthur insisted excitedly.

"Pooh!" the elder man retorted. "Mrs. Drummond and Nesta don't frequent ale-houses and hear vulgar gossip. It's improbable they've ever heard a word."

"Then why did she refuse me?"

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"First, because you haven't money enough," Boisragon stated with brutal directness; "secondly, because there's some other man who has."

"It may have been that, of course," Arthur said dejectedly, his impressionable spirit dashed. "Anyhow," he added, "you must tell Mrs. Drummond the truth. I can't bear for them to think—that—of me."

Lord Boisragon, despite his lack of humour, smiled perhaps in his sleeve at the notion of posting off to the agreeable widow in order to give the lie to that he himself had insinuated to her.

"Look here, Arthur," he said. "This is the position. I can do nothing at present. I'm expecting important news by next mail. At my death the question will be raised, and I am leaving no stone unturned to secure your rights for you. Your mother and I were married hurriedly—just after—shortly after I landed in Australia. With my usual luck the church was burned down soon after and the registers were destroyed. Your mother took away her certificate of the marriage when she left me. We separated just after you were born. We'd led a cat and dog life. We could stand it no longer. She returned to England, leaving you with me. From that day to this I have never seen or heard of her."

"She may be alive," Arthur broke in.

Lord Boisragon shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Possibly." He added coarsely, "All I care for is that she'll keep her distance. You've heard me rail at marriage. Lord! what a life your precious mother led me the short time we were together."

"But she may be alive," Arthur repeated, his face white, although it no longer covered his worst fears.

"The Lord forbid if it means our coming up against her," the other retorted brutally.

"But the marriage certificate? Is a certificate necessary? And didn't you have one?"

"I lost it," his father said shortly.

"Lost it? Then if the registers were destroyed and you have lost the certificate how can we prove anything?"

His father shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I never thought we should return to England. I ought to have kept it under lock and key. It was stolen."

"Mightn't we recover it?"

Boisragon shook his head.

Then he blurted out: "The truth is it was destroyed. That girl Crewdson—you remember Julia Crewdson—burnt it."

"Do you mean the servant at Long Meadows, a girl with a squint—rather a pretty girl?" Arthur demanded blankly.

The elder man's face became a mask. His heavy lids dropped.

"Yes! Julia Crewdson got hold of it and burned it."

"In the name of Heaven why? What business was it of hers?"

His father laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, spite, I suppose—revenge."

"But what had she to revenge? She seemed happy enough. She was well treated. Why, sometimes you even let her drive with you when you were going—"

He broke off short. His eyes on his father's masklike face dropped suddenly as though a spring in them had broken. The blood rushed to his brows. He lost his eagerness and spirit. He sank his head once more upon his hands.

After a minute:

"It's rather a rotten sort of world," he said.

His father stirred uncomfortably. A dark flush mounted to his cheeks. He launched a swift abased look toward the only face in the world for which he cared a rap. He winced to see its buoyant candour dragged and clouded.

Arthur shelved the subject.

"All that remains, then, is to find—your wife," he said tonelessly. He laid some stress upon the word. It meant much to him. It restored his self-respect and the right again to hold his head among his fellows. That it meant also his right to the title and estates had been thrust into the background by the more pressing dread of shame and contumely. But his father's wife had ceased to be a fair illusion. He no longer claimed her for mother.

"As she has the certificate she must be found," he went



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on with conviction. "There will be no difficulty, of course, as she was a person of family. And if she is dead no doubt her people would have it."

"The marriage was secret," Boisragon admitted sullenly. "In those days I was a deuced detrimental."

"Yet still—" Arthur persisted.

But his father had come to an end of his patience. He rose in a rage.

"Have done with it," he thundered. "I'll hear no more. The subject is loathsome. I'll not look for your mother. I won't bring such a curse again upon me. For all I know she may have married some other man. Nothing but a devil of a complication would result from finding her. Wherever she was there was mischief."

He added more calmly: "At present I am tracing the parson who married us and christened you. He knew the whole story. I expect news in a week. There now, have done with it until I speak of it."

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## CLEOPATRA.

He's speaking now,  
Or murmuring, *Where's my serpent of old Nile?*  
For so he calls me.

—ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

THE cut on Camilla's cheek was deeper than she had supposed.

When Dr. Brattleton arrived he put a stitch in it.

"It would be a pity to leave a scar," he said. A bit of silver wire drew together the edges of the wound. He took double pains over the tiny operation. He was inspired by the surgeon's skill in his art, and by the man's admiration of beauty.

"We must not have a scar," he said, as he completed it. He smiled again and sighed. He smiled at the beautiful girl's calm acceptance of her beauty as a matter of course. He sighed. Why do men grow wistful at the sight of loneliness?

His wife was plain and practical. He was a good and honest man, with a country practice and no great means. He knew in his heart that were it not for his wife's practicality and diligence his home would lack many a comfort and his children would be less well cared for. Yet like many a good and honest man he was conscious that his helpmeet left his life empty of that charm and grace which are as necessary to human happiness as food is.

"If you have two loaves," said the Greek philosopher,

"sell one and buy lilies. For it is as needful that the soul, as that the body should be fed."

Standing near to her, he could feel the aura of her wholesome body, pure and warm and sweet like the perfume of a flower. His fingers were upon the fine cool grain of her cheek. He smiled and sighed, and returned once again to his mindless patient, who, decked in foolish vanities, lay mouthing at her reflection in the glass.

Sir Nigel made no further remark upon the wound. But Camilla noted with a joy which was half pain how the moment he entered the room his eyes went with lightning directness to the plastered cheek. She saw the relief in his look when on the fourth morning the dressing being removed, his eyes found no mark beyond a thin thread of crimson. And of this there was soon no trace.

Benson was failing sadly. The last straw had been put to her misfortunes. It bade fair to break her patient, obstinate back. For Lewis, who had waited so long and so faithfully, was showing signs at length of disaffection. He had fallen beneath the spell of Mrs. Drummond's French maid, a neat, smart woman of thirty, with a flat white piquante face, bright eyes with a snap in them and "a way" with her.

Yet, even upon the brink of secession, he doggedly gave his old love a last chance.

If, even at that late hour, she would repent and consent to start housekeeping with him at Three Elms Farm, he was prepared to give the go-by to the foreigner.

But Benson was obdurate. What she had said she had said. Nothing would move her.

Lewis once again begged Sir Nigel to intercede for him. Sir Nigel declined. His last encounter had shown him the fruitlessness. He was too keen a judge of character not to realise that she would abide by her former decision.

Poor Benson wept a woman's bitterest tears over the neat package which returned her the heart-offerings of a lifetime. In her hard obdurate fashion she was devoted to the man. The last hope of her life had gone. She grew grimmer and more silent. The piebald patch in her dark

hair spread like a hand of omen. But, though it was plain her strength was fast failing, she relaxed no whit of her unremitting industries.

"She's had everything," she said once to Camilla, glancing toward the couch where her mistress lay moaning in her satins. "She's had my young days, my looks, my holidays, my sleep, my pleasure. And now she's having my life. There's things the doctors don't know. If I was to tell Dr. Brattleton how, when I touch her or dress her, I feel my strength ooze out at my finger ends, he'd only laugh. But it's true all the same. Healthy folk can't live with diseased ones and keep healthy, any more than a bad apple in a basket full of good ones won't slowly turn the others rotten. She's been the death of two nurses. Both came here strong young women. One died in six months, the other in fifteen. Nurse Hanson isn't what she was. And a maid under me went away in a decline. She'll get you next. Time and again when we've finished dressing and undressing her, I've seen you look fit to faint."

Camilla realised truth in what she said. There was a deathly atmosphere about the sick woman. Proximity with her occasioned a sense of depletion. However, she was young and healthy, and her walks and drives in the fine air recuperated her.

One morning Benson had not felt well enough to get up. Nurse Hanson had, therefore, sacrificed two of her hours of sleep in assisting Camilla to make the patient's toilette.

Later the patient had fallen into a doze, and Camilla sat in her usual place at the end of the room.

She looked up to see Sir Nigel enter.

He bade her a friendly "Good-morning." Then, with his paper and letters, he went to the couch.

She saw an involuntary flood of aversion sweep into his face. She saw the sickened glance with which he turned away.

He strode to a window and stood looking out across the Park. Gradually composure and fortitude returned to his face. He seemed to find rest and solace in the lovely scene. He regained his cheerfulness. He turned soon and came down the room to her. He stood in silence at the other side of the table, regarding her with quiet eyes.

She did not lift her head. She was conscious of a sense in him of great content. Across the space between them joy stole, and peace, and golden light. Instinctively, without considering what she did, her hands became motionless. She laid down her scissors. She sat almost without breathing in the beautiful enchantment of his presence, her face still bent above her work. The need of speech was unfelt. She basked in the magic of his nearness as sweetly and innocently as she would have stretched hands to the beneficent warmth of the sun.

Presently he broke the silence. In a voice of tender irony, he said :

" You are idle this morning, Nurse Camilla. Why do you not continue your snippings ? "

She raised her head and smiled. She brought her hands out of their dream.

" See now," she answered him. " I do. I was but idle for a moment."

She smoothed out a plane of lint, and made a show of being once more busy.

" How she obeys her tyrant ! " he observed, in the same strain of tender irony. " When for a moment she lays down her work, comes he with his whip. And meek as a lamb she resumes her shears."

She shook her head gently.

" Yes, but she does," he insisted. " Because, although it is the most absurd anomaly, it is yet a fact that this beautiful person, the most charming of her sex, is hired by me at a weekly wage to snip and snip, and drudge and drudge, and work her fingers to the bone. Till presently her youth and health and charm will pass. Do you not see that it is I who should alone support the burdens of my life. I should not shift them upon others—upon you." His voice dropped dejectedly.

She raised her head. Her eyes were brave and steady.

" It is woman's work," she said. " Keep to your man's tasks. They are burden enough. This that I do—and am thankful to do—is woman's work. Woman has found her right to work. She will not readily forego it."

" Do you like it ? " he demanded. " Do you like this

absurd inversion of the order of things. For so it is. Instead of awarding you the highest honours of my house, instead of glorifying fate because I enjoy the privilege of your sweet presence in my house, I order you about, chide you for sitting idle, and comport myself generally like other masculine slave drivers."

"You don't," she cried, laughing sweetly across at him. "You are the kindest of masters. You are all that a slave could desire."

"You confess me then your master? Do you like me for your master?" he cried, pleased. His face was young and ardent.

"I might so easily find a worse," she said, demurely.  
His expression fell.

"Don't look for one," he pleaded. "Fate has denied me so much. Be you kinder, Camilla, and do not deny me your presence under my roof. I am—I will be—all discretion if I may only keep you under my roof. I like to remember it shelters your gentle head from frosts and snows, that you eat of my meat and my bread, that you drink my wine—do you drink my wine, Camilla? Does Paget put you off with my worst claret? Dear! he shall give you my Chateau Lafitte. He shall give you—"

"But I do not drink wine," she insisted.

He remained silently smiling upon her. Then he resumed in a voice of soft abstraction:

"Whatsoever she does to me is wonderful—all that belongs to her beautiful life. When I was young it vexed me to find that Woman lived on meat and bread instead of living upon roses. Now I see a miracle in that her perfect body transmutes these common things to beautiful existence. For I am in love with you, Camilla. As I told you that night, I have been in love with you from time immemorial. Who knows but that I was Marc Antony and you my sweet 'Serpent of the Nile'? For, despite your airs of meekness, and your caps and aprons, there is pride indomitable in you. Woe to him who should make it flash forth like a rapier from a silken sheath!"

There was guile in his voice. His eyes gleamed blue. The passion in him magnified his stature.

She steeled herself against the enchantment invading her, the insidious sweet anaesthesia charging the air. She broke the spell. She caught up a reel of cotton and, unwinding it, snapped off a length with a sharp little jerk. She forced concentration upon her senses. With a matter-of-fact expression she threaded her needle.

"If you were Marc Antony," she said, "remember you behaved shockingly. Poor Cleopatra would carry the sting of the asp into many a life."

"Do you feel it still, dear Serpent?" he demanded softly. "And have you not forgiven me all these years? Remember I expiated my villanies against you."

She shook her head practically.

"I am a sensible woman," she insisted. "These things are the wildest speculation. Sufficient for the life are the—aspis thereof."

"Good!" he said. "And so you can be smart! You are full of surprises. With the face of Diana you pass your life in making poultries. With Madonna eyes you can be witty. But, Camilla, remember this," he added, with a half-serious railery, "if you had not my previous acquaintance, did you not make somewhat rapid strides into it the other night. If I remember aright, you——"

She extended a pleading hand.

"You are unkind again," she cried. "I asked you to remember nothing."

"Yet of course," he continued, disregarding her, "if we were merely resuming an old acquaintance at the stage where we had laid it down some centuries before, why then the thing becomes intelligible."

"Oh, I am ashamed that you should remember," she murmured.

He became serious.

"I tease you," he said. "But," he added smiling, "why do you provoke me to disprove your vaunts of common-sense and insensibility? So matter of fact a person as you claim to be should not blush and droop her eyes and betray such delicious confusions."

"There, I have done," he concluded abruptly. He took

out his watch. "Heavens how the centuries fly when one is teasing!" He smiled and was gone.

She dropped her work. She sat looking down the room. It was as though her life had gone out by the door.

She threw out her hands. "Oh, come back, come back and tease me again," she cried, in an imploring whisper. "It is so sweet! So sweet!" There was no other answer than the invalid's noisy breathing.

But a great mystery of love is this, that when the beloved is no longer there, he is yet there.

In the day, walking or working, she would suddenly be wrapped in a mysterious stillness, isolating her from all the world. And in the stillness he would be. She became conscious of him, a tender flame, a vibrant force, a soul within her soul. In the night she awoke to feel the hunger of his heart, to feel the flame of his passionate flesh desiring her. Mystic tender kisses pressed her. Her hands were tenderly held.

Convention may separate the lives of those who love, but it cannot separate the loves of those who live. Love is the subtlest and most vital of our human powers.

It is fire borrowed from the great creative fires of Life. Its flame in a human heart touches the body to higher and more delicate issues.

In such intimate sacred moments, she was glad with a womanish gratefulness that her sensitive modesty was saved by the sanction of that tender fiction he had framed of lives wherein she had been his wife.

Some mornings his face showed strained and white as the face of a man who fasts. And as the face of a man who fasts for holiness there was light mystic and strange in his eyes.

One morning, a beautiful dawn had tempted her early from her bed. She was surprised to find him suddenly overtake her at the beginning of a long grass walk. She had not heard him come. She was absorbed in thought, and his step in the soft turf had not been audible. Till suddenly she found him walking beside her.

She flushed red and white. Neither spoke. As he joined

her there fell upon them one of those mysterious stillnesses which are born of the divine content of souls.

The grass walk, bordered on either side by tall shrubs, dewy and cool with auroral freshness, cloistered them in. At the end of the walk was a white gate.

"I will walk with you to the gate," he said presently in a voice so quiet that it did not break the stillness.

A moment later he added in a practical voice which effectually broke it:

"For so long perhaps I can curb my pace to yours. But no longer. I walk for exercise."

The commonplace was needed. Otherwise in their mood they might have walked straightway into the clouds upon which the white gate gave.

"I walk because the gardens are so fresh and beautiful in the early morning," she returned. "I get exercise, of course, but that is incidental."

When they were nearing the gate, instinctively, without intending it, their feet moved more slowly, prolonging the sweetness of their moments.

"Camilla! Do you know what loneliness means?" he suddenly asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you feel it badly? Does it gnaw your bones?"

"Not so fiercely, perhaps."

He turned jealous eyes upon her.

"No woman," he insisted, "really knows loneliness. Women have friends, are fond of children, knit and sing, fill their days with numberless small pleasant consolations."

"Men too have friends."

"Their friends don't enter the arctic zone of them," he said. "A man smokes and talks with others, but all the while his mind is only half upon it. The other half perhaps is on a woman, perhaps on other thoughts he does not show to men. Allow me to know," he concluded grimly.

"I am so sorry," she said gently.

They had come to the gate. They stopped. He had said he would leave her at the gate. But he had not said he would not linger there a minute. He turned and looked at her.

She seemed to be endued with the virginal freshness of the morning. Her clear eyes were filled with clearest light. Her lips were cool and dewy with that maiden immaculacy which alone can stay a strong man's fever.

He drew suddenly some paces from her. Then across the paces he said quietly:

"Do you know that there is nothing but the flimsiest convention between us, Camilla? For fifteen years I have been wifeless. For nineteen years indeed—if you must know the truth. You too are free. If you should give me your love, nobody in all the world would be harmed one whit."

She shook her head.

"Honour, ideals, all that is best in the world, all that is highest in you and in me would be harmed."

"I love you honestly," he said. "Nature bids us be happy. And good, my dear. You would be as sacred to me as the most securely wedded wife could be."

"I should be—" She broke out impetuously. She stopped short.

"What?"

She lifted her eyes and said the word with courage.

"Your mistress."

It was as though she had struck him.

"I would have killed any man who should call you so," he said in a voice of steel.

"I should call myself so."

"Did I not charge you with pride?" he accused her vehemently.

"Yes! I am too proud to be any man's mistress," she said, her face so white that it seemed alight.

"Ah dear!" he told her sadly, "I am ashamed to have hurt you. I thought of you only as my love. It is you who would give her hard names."

He lifted his hat and left her.

\* \* \* \* \*

For three days he entered and quitted the sick-room without looking at her.

On the fourth, his eyes sought hers, a blue flame, deprecating, passionate. She surrendered her arms. His face flashed into a smile. The truce was ratified.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

SALLY LEWIS.

When young Desire first shakes his lustrous wings,  
Rejoicing in the strength which manhood brings,  
And, like the dragon-fly in summer's pride,  
Flaunts his bright armoury from side to side.

\* \* \* \* \*  
O Love ! there is no talisman like this,  
The sanctity of one true woman's kiss.

NESTA adjusted to the proper angle on her pretty head a straw hat over which a profusion of scarlet poppies rioted. It drooped at one side and was caught up on the other by a knot of amber velvet and a bunch of bearded wheat. Under its shade her sea-green eyes, her shell-pinks and her warm brown hair suggested Persephone returned to earth, Persephone fair and mysterious from her six months' sojourn in the underworld.

In her mind, however, was no fairness nor any mystery. Nothing more than a commonplace desire to bring Arthur Colville once again to her feet. She had found him stimulating. Without the zest of his young adulation life was tasting flat.

It was absurd, she thought, for him to have taken flight in heroics. She could not marry him. That was decided. But she preferred his company to that of any other. And she thought she would like him to kiss her again.

She put on her hat. She selected a dainty sunshade, a thing of lace and accordion frills, resembling the crumpled petals of an immense flower.

She sauntered down the road in the direction she had seen him take an hour earlier.

It was close upon lunch time, and he could not return to the castle by any other route.

She came in late. She had sauntered long, expecting at every turn to meet him. He had not come. She concluded that he must be lurching with the Pendaubyns or, more probably, with Sir Nigel.

"What makes you so quiet?" Mrs. Drummond questioned as they sat. "Has anything happened?"

The widow's equable and pleasant temperament had soon disposed of her small panic. After all it had proved baseless. The boy had done nothing rash. The desperation she had imagined in him, seeing him rush distraught from the house, had soon evaporated. He seemed to have resumed his normal humour. When they met he behaved like a rational being.

Like all worldly persons she was particularly sensitive to her own ridicule. And, like all worldly persons, conscience pricks which subsequently proved to have been baseless, not only showed her as ridiculous in her own sight, but left her less prone to further scruples.

Indeed, where she had condemned, she now found herself admiring Nesta's calmer philosophy, which, as it turned out, had so much better suited the case.

"Nothing has happened," Nesta answered to her mother's question. "Only I am bored."

"Have you had enough of the country? Are you anxious to be moving?"

She sighed. Her indolent nature inclined her to remain. The air suited her. She found the quiet old garden, with a novel, with interludes of fruit and cream, and occasional quiet dinners, a pleasing change from the activities of town.

She wondered whether it might be that she was beginning to feel her age. This symptom of sighing at the prospect of change was a new and inconvenient one. For Nesta's future had still to be arranged.

She was relieved now, but slightly puzzled, when Nesta replied a little eagerly to her suggestion.

"Oh, no. We are very comfortable here. I like the quiet."

Nesta also was developing the new symptom. And as in her case it could not be attributed to years, her mother felt that she might re-assure herself.

The whole afternoon Nesta sat in her room, lazily reading a sensational novel. She was very little moved by its sensations, however. Her eyes were now upon her book, now upon her reflection in a mirror, now upon the road by which she expected Arthur to return.

He did not come. After tea she again put on her hat. She took another sunshade, one which more appealed to her at the moment. Once again she sauntered down the road.

Her persistency was rewarded. But at the same time she received a shock. For Arthur did not come alone. And his companion was by no means to her taste. She saw him some time before he saw her. Seated upon the rail of a rustic bridge, under the thick shelter of an elder tree, she was screened from sight while the road winding uphill below her was in full view.

He came loitering along it, his arm about the waist of a girl whose arm was about his neck. From time to time they turned their lips and kissed. The sounds of their laughter and of Arthur's feverish shouts ascended to her.

Amazed, she pulled down her sunshade, and drew further into cover. Her eyes peered curiously upon the couple.

Who could the girl be? Nobody she knew, of course. Girls one knew did not walk along a public road with their arms round a man's neck, kissing him. Who, then, was she?

Her worldly knowledge was beyond her years. As the couple slowly climbed the road, kissing and laughing as they came, it did not take her long to guess the genus to which the girl belonged. And presently she recognised her. One of the Camboyne girls had once pointed her out in the village, and had whispered about her. They had both stared inquisitively, though with a species of contemptuous repulsion, upon her.

She was a handsome person, with full blue eyes and scarlet lips wreathing voluptuously over china white teeth. Her hair

was thick and golden, artificially golden as was shown by the black arched brows which made a bizarre contrast with it.

Nesta looking down upon her from her seat upon the bridge saw that she was of a fine figure, though heavy of build. Arthur and she had exchanged hats. The cheap gaudy flowers of her hat sat oddly but not ridiculously upon the young man's shapely, close-cropped head. She wore his linen yachting cap with jauntiness. A great rose perched in the angle of an ear. She was smoking a cigarette with an assumption of audacious relish. She removed it from time to time to respond to his kisses with an equally audacious relish. Then their laughter went up on the air.

Nesta's social tact apprized her that she had no place in an episode like this. She was aware that the proprieties demanded a retreat.

But she was too angry to obey proprieties. She was surprised at herself for being so angry. She determined to sit where she was and punish Arthur by the shame he must feel that she should detect him in such company.

This, then, was the reason he had taken his dismissal so lightly! She had been sadly piqued that he had had the strength of mind to keep away from her. She had not previously believed him capable of so much resolution.

It was an insult that he should thus soon have found a substitute. And such a substitute! She examined the girl attentively. She noted her swaggering air, the rustic stride of her strong limbs, her cheap and common clothes. Mentally, she contrasted her with herself and dwelled on the fact that she was the admired of Princes.

When Arthur, his arm still about his companion, neared the bridge he found Nesta sitting there. Seeing her cool, beautiful eyes upon him, and her curling lip, he started and changed colour.

His disturbance was but momentary, however. It was succeeded by a little rush of revengeful exultation. In lapsing from his ideals, the very height from which he had fallen supplied the momentum which carried him into depths. For the moment self-respect and his natural refinement were submerged. The intoxication in his blood spurred his senses and blunted his sensibilities.

Nesta had cut him to the heart. She had treated him as a boy, had utterly flouted his affection and proposal. Let her see that after all he was no mere sentimental lover sighing for her like a furnace! Let her see he was on the contrary a man of the world, who could amuse himself!

With a deliberation which was in itself an affront, he slowly withdrew his arm from about his companion, and careless—or it may be forgetting—that he was not wearing his own proper head-gear, he raised the girl's flower-laden hat in greeting.

His companion broke into a laugh. Defiance and embarrassment struggled. She was not yet so hardened that she could, insensible, meet the cold regard of women of repute.

Then ashamed of her embarrassment, she blurted awkwardly as they passed:

"Look out, chappie. Mind your P's and Q's when there's fine ladies about."

The blood rushed to his face. He quickened his steps. His brows met, frowning.

Nesta had wholly disregarded his salute. Her calm, beautiful eyes looked serenely past him as though he and his girl had been wholly unperceived.

That he could have borne. He was not so blinded but that he knew she was justified.

But that the girl should insult her, that this man-of-the-world amusement should betray its boorish hoof so coarsely, stung his better nature back to life. He moved on, mortified and angry.

From under her lashes Nesta watched them. She saw them disappear round a bend in the road. She still sat there, with an impassive face and a slightly curled lip, looking down from her seat on the bridge to the road winding in and out among the trees below her.

I cannot pretend that the moral aspect of the case affected her. The contempt she felt was one appertaining to manners. She was wondering how a man of Arthur's refinement could tolerate the company of a vulgar-spoken peasant of coarse habits and neglected nails.

She could not imagine herself for a moment amused by

the society of a stable-boy or a footman. The smell of cheap hair-oil and inferior tobacco which her dainty nostrils detected as she phrased it "miles away," would have proved safeguard enough for her virtue.

As she reflected, she saw that the girl was coming back—alone and clothed in her right head-gear. Her face was clouded and sullen. She walked awkwardly, conscious of the chilling level scrutiny of her superior.

To relieve her embarrassment she pretended to be absorbed in something she held in her hand. She kept opening and closing her palm. She peered into it with a pleased half-furtive expression.

Nesta caught the gleam of gold. As she passed, her feet moving still more clumsily, her eyes flashed one angry gleam toward the lady. Her lips parted as though for a moment she contemplated casting ugly words at her. They closed again, however, with abrupt decision.

Nesta had an intuition that Arthur had forbidden her to address her.

She went her way with an air of sullen disappointment. She appeared presently upon the lower road. She stared up brazenly. Her diffidence had gone. Her eyes darted insults.

Nesta rose leisurely, put up her sunshade and began to walk home.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## ARTHUR AND NESTA.

In great perell is set youthede,  
Delete so doth his bridil leede.

—CHAUCER.

NEAR the house she found Arthur waiting for her. He advanced with a shamefaced air. He attempted to conceal it beneath a show of coolness. He lifted his cap and stepped up to her.

"Why did you cut me just now?" he demanded.

With her superior social experience she saw him a mere schoolboy.

"One does not recognise a man in such company," she retorted superciliously.

"What is wrong with her? You know nothing about her," he protested lamely.

"It is sufficient to see her," she returned. "If you associate with creatures you can only expect decent people to ignore you."

"When decent people treat one badly——" he began savagely.

"Persons like that are scarcely likely to behave better," she concluded smartly.

He snapped his fingers.

"That," he cried, "for how they behave! There is a comfort in associating with people whose behaviour one way or another does not affect one a rap."

His cheeks were flushed. His eyes sparkled. His slender frame seemed tense with excitement.

His reckless independence of her gave him value. She could not help admiring him.

"Arthur, don't act so absurdly," she rebuked him. She smiled indulgently. "Why have you deserted us! Can we not be friends?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said sullenly. "I believed in you. I thought so much of you. I shall never again trust a woman."

"What have I done?" she submitted placably. "Would it not have been wrong of me to accept you when I do not love you as a wife should?"

He detected the insincerity of her tone. He knew the sentiment was not genuine. He would have been more affected had she confessed an inferior standard which was truly hers than he was by her profession of one superior which he knew to be a pose.

"Well, it's no good going back to it," he said. "It's over and done with."

"You could not have really cared," she accused him, "if you can so soon forget me. Men have killed themselves for women."

He shot her a suspicious glance. Could she have heard anything? He saw by her face and by her reproachfully pouted lip that she was merely generalising.

"What fools they must have been," he blurted, not without self-consciousness.

She bit the pouted lip. She tilted her charming chin. She moved on petulantly.

"You are very rude," she said, offended.

He moved after her with a sullen air of being drawn against his will. He walked a step behind her. She slackened her pace with so much guile that he did not realise the slackening until he found himself abreast of her.

She glanced sideways at him, in part superiority, in part friendliness, but as though surprised to see him.

"If you will not be rude again," she said, with an effective smile, "you may walk with me to the Court."

He mumbled something in his throat. It was more a



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sullen depreciation of the privilege than thanks for it. He took out a cigarette and lighted it.

The little ivy-covered lodge was now in sight. Her eyes measured the road between them and it. She realised that in the time it would take them to cover it Arthur's allegiance would have been for ever lost or won. The risk of losing gave it an exaggerated value. Moreover she liked him better than any man she knew. He was so different from the others. If the others admired, they did not idealise her. Men accustomed to make love to their neighbours' wives, as did many of the men of her set, do not idealise. Women must long since have taken a lower place in their minds before they can do so. Arthur's imaginative worship, the first fruits of young passion, was so different from the spruce, well-groomed satiety of those others which had so many times before eaten and drunk and on the morrow died.

To lose it altogether would be to lose a thing worth keeping. It created a delicious atmosphere. It gave her thrills to remember his kisses.

She had no intention of accepting him for husband. That was over. Even when she had thought of marrying him, she had never been sure that he would make her a comfortable husband.

Versed in the lore of her world, she had a notion that he would make a better lover than husband. As a husband his devotion and the perfections he would exact from her might be fatiguing. A husband should be, according to her creed, a mere background, ornate and distinguished, a fit setting for a woman's elegant life.

Without conscious formulation of an immoral situation, she had harboured pleasant dreamings of some wealthy man of title for husband, one who could give her all that she felt was socially and materially her due, with Arthur for a lover, an adoring, interesting companion to take her about while her husband discreetly repaired to his club.

She had seen so much of life, that this modern version of the marriage story seemed to her the normal one.

"Arthur!" she said softly, her eyes still measuring the distance, her feet lagging. "Do you know that you are behaving very foolishly? It is very shocking form, apart from

being most unkind of you, to take things as you are doing. One so admires—everybody must admire—a man who takes a rebuff smiling and goes on just the same. As we are in the same set we shall of course be thrown together constantly. You must be civil to me, must ask me to dance and take me in to dinner. So it is foolish and very, very unkind of you to act as you are doing. Yesterday I had a good cry about it. Really I did!"

Alas for poor human nature! She was as beautiful and graceful as ever. She modulated her voice to the smoothest, most seductive tones. Three weeks earlier he had worshipped the very air she breathed, had sincerely contemplated shooting himself when she refused him.

But he was of a plastic age and temperament. A concomitance of circumstances had combined to push him from the young enchanted heights on which he walked. Her rejection and his intuitive realisation from the manner of it that his goddess's small pretty feet were merely of clay, had given him the first downward impulse. The charge of illegitimacy, staggering his confident pride, had done the rest. He had tumbled headlong.

He had got to his feet among, as he believed, the ruins of his life. Stunned at first and savage, his forces had presently readjusted themselves. He was young. Life was quick in him. The cup of love and life had been dashed from his lips, but—there were dregs still left in it. He had drunk and found savour.

Had Nesta been wiser she would not have attempted to recapture him while he was still moving in rebound.

For, strange as it may seem, the while confident of her power, she plied her charms and attempted to recall him, his mind was full of the girl she dismissed as a "creature."

In the new intoxication of his blood, Nesta appealed but little to him. Her delicate charm and beauty had appealed to his imagination. But for the present his imagination was submerged. The elementary planes of being now paramount in him demanded coarser fare. In contrast with the sturdy flesh-and-blood girl of the village with her bold eyes and ripe scarlet lips, Nesta for the time appeared to him almost

insipid. Sally Lewis was at all events frank and warm-blooded.

Three weeks earlier he would have suffered all things to save or to cause a tear from Nesta's lovely eyes. Now her confession of tears on his account moved him not at all. He merely wondered what she wanted of him.

"I don't know what you are complaining of," he protested. He could not help feeling ashamed that the coarse charms—for he knew them to be coarse—of Sally Lewis should so subjugate him that he had scarcely been able to keep his mind to Nesta's words.

"When a girl refuses a man she must expect to lose him. She can't play fast and loose with him. I don't see why she should wish to. Either she cares about him or she doesn't."

"She may care about him as a friend," she returned, "although there may be reasons why she cannot marry him."

He stopped dead in the road. He flung away his cigarette. He turned and faced her.

"Are there any reasons why you cannot marry me?" he demanded abruptly. "Tell me them."

As she did not speak:

"From a worldly standpoint," he persisted, scanning her closely, "I am a decent match. At all events a good many persons when I was in town appeared to think so," he concluded with a cynical laugh.

She met his eyes steadily and without the tremor of an eyelash. He was too young to know that a woman may do so and lie. He was intensely relieved to believe she had not heard the talk.

"There are no reasons, of course," she answered. "You are an excellent *parti*, Arthur. But," she glanced at him with an ingenuous smile, "as I told you I don't wish to be married—not for a long, long time. Why should I? I am quite happy with Mother. But I should like you always to be my friend."

He turned away with an impatient exclamation. It sounded so cheap and insincere. His father had been right. There was some richer man in the case. He walked on.

"It all sounds very pretty, Nesta," he said quietly, "but it

isn't you, you know. I wish you would tell me the truth. I suppose one reason at all events is that you didn't care enough about me. Still, I can't see that you have anything to grumble at."

"Well! do be nice and come and see us as you used to. I miss you frightfully," she appealed eagerly. "Arthur! Do let us be just the same. We always got on so well together. We were about equal at Bridge and at tennis. And our valse-steps seemed made for one another."

He could not conceal from himself that her persistency bored him. Involuntarily he stopped and looked back along the road.

She saw by his eyes that he was thinking of "the creature."

It was as though he had flicked her in the face. She tightened her lips and walked on.

He came after her, apologetic.

"Oh, I'll come, of course," he said. "Of course, I always meant to come after I had got over the first disappointment." But there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

"Why, here we are at the gate," she said. "Won't you come in now for a moment and see Mother? She will be so pleased to see you again."

His eyes were down the road, restless, pre-occupied, the pupils dilating. He brought them back. He forced a smile.

"I'm frightfully sorry," he said, "but really I can't stop. Please remember me to Mrs. Drummond and say I'll soon call. Good-bye."

He lifted his cap and hurried off.

"Why, you're going the wrong way," she called after him, laughing slightly.

He turned and stared. Then he said:

"Oh! It's all right. I've got to go back to the village, you know. I forgot a commission—something for the Guv. And I forgot it."

He lifted his cap again. His features had a curious embarrassed warp. Then he shot away down the road like a schoolboy released from school.

She turned and went in at the gate, a dull anger she had never previously felt possessing her. She knew that she had lost him.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## LOVE'S SURPRISES.

The love that will be annihilated sooner than be treacherous has already made death impossible and affirms itself a native of the deeps of absolute and inextinguishable being.

ONE afternoon, the invalid having earlier declined to take her lunch, declined her tea.

"You will have to fetch Sir Nigel," Benson said.

Camilla hesitated. Then she recalled herself to her duty and went down.

As once before, her knock upon the library door was unheard. Having twice knocked without response, she opened the door and entered.

As once before, she found him sitting in reverie. The fine, imaginative head was dropped upon his breast. Age was in his face. His eyes were filmed with grief.

The great room seemed a scene of desolation. The old books in their cases showed tired. She had a sense that the portraits on the walls looked out through veils of cobwebs. The air was dust-charged.

Such was the intensity of his mood that it seemed to her to touch the very chairs with blight.

Through the windows nature showed joyous and brilliant. The day had been hot. The afternoon sky was of a golden blue. White clouds floated softly. They looked like snow birds touched with light. Roses were dropping their crimson and yellow petals to the earth, as though over-burdened

by beauty. Through the opened windows the scents of the gardens, mingling a thousand sweetenesses, stole. She could hear the soft wash of the sea, lapping contentment.

Across the velvet lawns peacocks trailed their jewelled tails. An empty dish in an embrasured window showed that their master in his loneliness had not forgotten them. Near the window a mother rabbit and a baby, a ball of velvet brownness with shy ears erect, and a round confiding eye upon the house, nibbled their supper of short grass.

From beneath his chair, Fanny as ever on guard, protruded a brown nose, challenging the intruder.

The book he had been reading lay upon his knee. He held a thumb and finger still upon a page. It appeared he had been upon the point of turning it when the mood of desolation took him.

She stood quite still. Fanny beneath his chair set quiet eyes upon her. The eyes said, "Go softly. He may be asleep."

All at once the blood forsook her heart. It rushed again to it. A sense of yearning emptiness assailed her arms. A storm of pent-up feelings bore down the flood-gates of her nature, leaving high and dry a haven of pity, of joy and divine tranquillity for his harried soul.

On an over-mastering impulse she moved swiftly up the room and stood before him.

He raised his eyes quietly, as though some instinct had already apprised him of her presence. He lifted his head and sat up in his chair. He put off dejection as though it had been a mask. He smiled her his quick brave smile.

His eyes, cleared of their pain, glowed blue again and clear. They asked a question.

She forgot what she had come for. She forgot all else but that here in his beautiful home, surrounded by light and life and bountiful nature, the man she loved sat in his dull room, starving, alone—alone with a ravaging loneliness. She recalled his words, a loneliness that gnawed the bones.

Her hands went out to him, the strong warm hands he had styled "temptations."

Her eyes yearned with a supreme tenderness. Her lips

trembled like water. Over her cheeks a few tears started and ran.

"Oh," she cried in a low voice. "You said I was proud. See! I am no longer proud. I am nothing but loving."

He got to his feet. He set aside his book. He moved with a great encompassing quietness. His face was soft and alight.

He took her two hands, folded them gently together, lifted them to his lips and silently dropped them.

"Now, tell me what you came for," he said in his ordinary voice.

She was bewildered—crushed—rebuffed. Had he understood? Must she put her surrender into plainer words? How did one express these things? Oh! he should have known! He should have known by instinct what she meant! He should have spared her the shame of words!

The impulse of surrender still possessed her. Over his fortitude and quietness his mood still trailed like a dun veil. Every fibre of her throbbed to put some joy into his starved brave life.

Her lids dropped. She shook like a leaf. She blenched to the strain of a step which meant the violent up-rooting of all her honoured landmarks and traditions.

"You do not understand," she said in a voice which strove to be steady.

"I understand, dear," he said gravely. He added tenderly: "But a man does not take a woman in that mood, Camilla. We are not tigers and ravening wild beasts."

He smiled mysteriously upon her, as she stood quivering before him.

"How have you come through life unsmirched?" he asked. "Have you lived suspended like Mahomet's coffin betwixt Heaven and earth? Love is sweet, and where it is true it is pure. But—it is human. How could I take you with your eyes shining in your face like the muzzles of two celestial revolvers demanding a man's highest honour or his life?"

He smiled again mysteriously, compunctiously.

"Go away," he said gently. "Go away with your sweet treasons against my better self. You tempt a sorely tempted man, Camilla."

An involuntary sigh uphove his chest. It was a species of human earthquake.

He shook his head.

"It would be a mistake," he said. "You are so constituted that all I most desire in you would be withheld. I want you confident and glad like a lily in the sunshine. I don't want you with your sweet pride tumbled and your soul abased. All my life I have had a liking (greedy if you will) for the best. In the best of all things I will not content myself with second best. Moreover, odd as it may seem in this relation there is you to be considered, my Camilla. And these affairs are not in my Camilla's philosophy."

In the chill light of rejection she felt humbled to the dust. It seemed as though her hands were suddenly full with gifts which had been returned upon them. She was at a loss to know what to do with them.

Then she cried, with a child's impetuous appeal to be approved: "You are not disappointed in me. Say I have not fallen low in your esteem. I could not bear to see you so unhappy."

She saw the colour fly his face. She heard his panting breath.

He controlled his voice and answered:

"Don't grudge having given me a glimpse of a white soul, dear. Life holds little enough."

He caught her hands suddenly and folding them again together kissed them. She cried out at the scorch of his lips. His mood was changing. The blood mounted to his face. His breast heaved passionately.

"Go," he said. "And," he added, his mouth twisting in a spasmodic smile, "as you value your life, Camilla, never tempt me again."

At the door she turned.

"I had forgotten," she said, and delivered her message. Her eyes dared not dwell on his tortured face.

He broke out vehemently.

"I shall not come. How can I come—now?" He strode to a window and stood with his back to her. "I am going out. Surely you and Benson can manage her."

Ten minutes later, however, he appeared in the sick room. His face was still pale but composed.

"Now," he said in his normal strong and cheerful fashion. "Let us see what this is all about."

The patient was presently enjoying her meal, although she whimpered and regarded her oppressors with malignant eyes. Her beautiful gown was spoiled by two cups of tea she had mischievously overturned upon it. And Benson was crying in a fit of irritable weakness.

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## CHAPTER XL.

## THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.

Men of character are the conscience of the society to which they belong.

LORD BOISRAGON was drinking heavily. Either as cause or as effect he was beset by a perpetual dread lest his wife should appear and claim her right to share his new position. He remembered her tenure twenty years before. He remembered the life he had described as "cat and dog." With a shaking hand he wiped moist pallid brows at the thought of its renewal.

He fortified himself with brandy. When he had been for some hours without a stimulant he turned in a panic, expecting to find her at his elbow.

Arthur was growing to be less and less a comfort to him. Reserve had arisen between them. The youth maintained an attitude of peevish injury against his father. He was out the greater portion of his time. He went out early and came in late. How he occupied himself his father did not ask. So long as he did not occasion a scandal it appeared to him to be a matter of insignificance.

He raised no lofty standards of conduct. His philosophy placed no other condition upon the sowing of wild oats save that there should be no reaping. In this relation, he held it was the reaping that played the deuce.

From this standpoint he had talked to the youth very straight. Then with a sense that he had done his duty he had dismissed the subject.

The news from Brisbane had been bad—the worst. The

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clergyman who had performed the marriage ceremony had been dead for years. His evidence, therefore, was not available. And upon his evidence they had been relying. With the registers destroyed there was no other to establish Arthur's claim. None that was except the re-appearance of Arthur's mother with the certificate.

This, however, was a contingency beyond all others to be dreaded.

He pondered the question day and night. He pondered it muddled by brandy. He pondered it sober. He reflected that possession was nine points of the law. At all events, the other side would find the utmost difficulty in establishing their case. They should be fought tooth and nail. Arthur was his legal heir. He should not lose his inheritance.

Even had he not been, his father's action would perhaps have been the same. He loved him with a sullen doting devotion. He was all he had in the world. All that could be should be done for him. Careless by nature and extravagant, he began now to save, to look about him for lucrative investments, to keep a watchful eye upon his sources of expenditure and income.

He had not dared to tell the boy the news from Brisbane. He was haunted by the suspicion that he had sunk so low in his esteem that he was dubious even of the marriage. In desperate moments he made heroic resolutions to trace his wife. But in moods less hardy—when he was sober that was—he wiped moist brows at the thought. If it must come to that, that was at all events a thing to put off till the morrow.

In the meantime he was assiduously keeping the Vansittarts in hand. He corresponded with Mrs. Vansittart; he sent her hampers of fruit and flowers and rich cream from the dairy. He wished to invite them a second time. But Arthur gave him to understand clearly that he was in no temper to play cavalier to Mamie.

He decided to temporise. Arthur must take his time and his own way of forgetting Nesta.

But no scheming mother ever took more thought or pains to obtain a rich *parti* for her daughter than did he to retain Mamie Vansittart for Arthur. She was not the only well-to-do girl in the world he knew, but experience had shown him

the value of the bird in hand. And in the event of trouble, those totals he had formerly arrived at would prove invaluable.

Whether just or not, his views as to British law were that the verdict is to that side which spends the more money. And the other side, Arthur's cousin, was both poor and obscure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Persons looking back upon events for the furtherance whereof they have strained every thought and effort, more often than not will find that their personal efforts were mere straws upon the current of destiny, travelling it may be in the direction of that current, but in no way determining it.

"Is there such a factor as fate?" is a common question. It might as well be asked, "Are there such factors as tides and the force of gravity?"

That each individual is the subject of a special Providence is unlikely. But that each, journeying along life's way, is from time to time caught up and swept on by mysterious, irresistible forces into new channels and environment without effort or intention of his own, is certain. Such a force, by the law of human inter-dependence, will in the same moment possibly also change the destinies of a number of others, as among snowflakes drifting leisurely earthward a sudden gust of wind will whirl a host of them out of their normal course and place them where their own momentum could not have placed them.

Some such force of destiny it was no doubt which caused the heel of Camilla's shoe one afternoon to so strike against an oaken wainscot that a secret spring was set in action and the door of the little recess flew open.

She had forgotten it. She had not after all mentioned its existence to Sir Nigel. Stooping now to shut it she was taken with an irresistible conviction that he ought to be told. There might be something in it of importance.

She put in her hand and drew out the contents. There was the baby's age-stained shoe with the faded ribbon running through its border. There was the large sealed envelope of which she had previously caught but a glimpse.

She examined the superscription. It gave her a little shock of surprise to read, "Mrs. Talbot Colville." The name

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was familiar. Yet for a moment she did not identify it. Then she remembered. Lord Boisragon had been Talbot Colville before his succession to the title.

Mystified, but without attaching much importance to the enigma, she turned her head. She found the invalid's eyes fixed evilly upon her. She shrank with a sense of guilt. The secret if secret there was was the sick woman's. She expected an outcry. None came. The eyes remained fixed upon her. But they were dull and without comprehension. Perhaps her sole interest in the cupboard had been the key of the escritoire.

Camilla withdrew to the end of the room and once more examined the envelope. It was sealed in three places. It was tied with green silk cord and the knot was safeguarded by a fourth large slab of wax. Like the baby's shoe, the envelope was dust and age-stained. There was neither stamp nor postal mark. The superscription was in a woman's writing with that disguising reversion to childishness which comes when a woman writes large as she did in her copy-books.

Camilla did not concern herself much about the letter. She wondered vaguely how and why it had come there. She did not know enough of the relations between the houses of Harland and Boisragon to find a mystery.

She locked the relics away in a drawer, intending to give them next day to Sir Nigel. As she put away the tiny shoe, the pathos of its smallness allied with its age-stains filled her with a sudden tenderness. Poor little baby! she reflected. Poorer mother! was her second thought. The little shoe was probably a mother's treasured memento of the dead.

After the fatigues of the invalid's toilette next morning Benson went to her room to rest.

Camilla was alone with Sir Nigel therefore when she gave him the shoe and the envelope. She told him of the secret cupboard. She told him how it had been made known to her. She crossed the room and struck the wainscot with a foot until the little door flew open.

He seemed surprised. He did not show much interest, however.

"Odd!" he said. "Who can have had it put there? And for what reason."

He examined the shoe. His expression was blank. He turned over the letter and read the superscription.

In a moment the blankness went out of his face. He was all alertness.

"Mrs. Talbot Colville," he read. "Boisragon's wife, of course! There was no other Talbot Colville."

He examined it closely.

"How in the world did it come to be here—in my house? It looks like my wife's writing too."

He questioned Camilla closely upon Lady Harland's action. His face was once again blank before the inexplicability of the thing.

"She may have known Boisragon's wife of course—years ago," he said with a puzzled air.

He put the envelope and the shoe into his pocket.

"You are sure there are no other mysteries?"

She was sure the secret cupboard was now empty.

"You did right to tell me," he said. "I will go over in the morning and give the things to Boisragon. The letter might be important."

A thought seemed to occur to him. "It might be very important," he added with a sudden seriousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lord Boisragon was sitting in the library when Sir Nigel was announced. He had been writing to Mrs. Vansittart. The letter was to accompany a basket of orchids. In rather clumsy fashion he had been labouring to convey the impression—without stating it in so many words—that Arthur was pining for Miss Mamie.

"We find the place dull," he had written. "We amuse ourselves by planning excursions we will make when you and your charming daughter visit us again."

Then he had come to a halt and stared heavily before him. His brain was not subtle. He pondered long upon the reason he should give for not following up the sentence by a special pressing invitation. He could not tell the truth—that Arthur would have none of them.

He went to a sideboard and took a draught of brandy. He returned to the table and sat down awaiting inspiration.

Sir Nigel's entrance was a pleasant respite from the toils of

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correspondence. He liked Sir Nigel. He liked him the more because he was fond of Arthur and had been good to him. It comforted him to think that in the future when Arthur might need a friend, one so trusty and sincere as Harland might prove invaluable.

After they had chatted for some minutes of immediate local interests, Sir Nigel produced his treasure trove.

"I had been intending to call," he said. "These brought me earlier." He explained how he had come by them.

"How they originally got into the cupboard," he concluded, "Heaven alone knows. My wife of course may have known your wife, although she never spoke of her."

Lord Boisragon sat staring at the envelope with dropped jaws. His heavy face was ghastly. His eyeballs oscillated. He looked like a man who sees a ghost. He seemed afraid to touch the things.

"It's my wife's writing," he said hoarsely.

After a while he took up the tiny shoe and examined it.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, his face suddenly shiny with moisture.

Sir Nigel reflected that he had been right in supposing the discovery to be of consequence. He decided that his friend was deferring the opening of the letter until he should be alone. He rose.

"I am going on," he said. "I thought these might be important. I will call in some other day, when we can finish our chat."

Boisragon thrust out a tremulous hand.

"Harland, stop," he besought him. "For the Lord's sake stop. I think there is as you say something important in the envelope. I might like to talk it over with you. I've been a good deal bothered of late. It's got on my nerves."

Sir Nigel sat down.

"I am sorry," he said. "You do look out of sorts."

Boisragon took up the envelope and turned it over. It shook and rustled in his grasp. He seemed even now afraid to put his anticipations to the test.

"I suppose you've heard talk," he blurted, shooting a glance at his guest from beneath his heavy lids.

Sir Nigel shrugged his shoulders upon the talk.

"Oh well," Lord Boisragon said, "I confess appearances gave ground for it. But they're all wrong."

He still fingered the letter. He appeared to be talking in order to gain time.

"This," he said, holding up the envelope, "may contain a complete refutation of it all."

"I heartily hope it will," Sir Nigel said.

He had seen a woman act in similar fashion, dallying with a telegram in her hand, in dread of that it might contain. He could not understand a man so acting.

He got up and walked to a window in order not to seem to observe the other's dilatoriness.

"It looks like rain," he said, scanning the clouds. "The glass was falling when I left home."

He heard the snip of scissors. He heard the crack of wax, the rend of paper, as the flap of an envelope was slit by an agitated hand.

He heard sounds like the heavy panting of an animal. They ceased. Then Boisragon exclaimed in a hoarse whisper:

"Thank the Lord!"

He turned round. The other held a paper in a shaking hand. It jerked and rustled. His prominent orbs were fixed. A smile such as a dog smiles when he snarls contracted his lips.

"You have found what you expected?" Sir Nigel said.

He looked up. He lifted the paper and fluttered it aloft in triumph.

"Found what I've been wanting for years," he said. "Found what will choke their lies in their damned throats. The church where I married my wife was burned and the registers destroyed. I lost my copy of the marriage certificate. Here is the other—my wife's. I'd have willingly given £20,000 to feel what I'm feeling. Arthur's legitimacy and succession are placed beyond question."

## CHAPTER XLI.

"MRS. TALBOT COLVILLE."

Marriage is full of phases. Don't mistake them for finalities.

SIR NIGEL crossed the room and offered his hand.

"Congratulations!" he said cordially. "I had no notion the affair had been so serious." They shook hands.

"I assure you it was," Lord Boisragon returned. His expression was now jubilant. He kept staring at the paper. He felt it between his thumb and fingers to reassure himself of its substantiality.

He looked up and passed it, albeit reluctantly, across the table.

"There it is," he said. "I scarcely like to let it go out of my hand."

Sir Nigel glanced it over. He did not take it up. His quick eye gathered in the glance that it was a marriage certificate in due form.

"The problem is," he said with a puzzled smile, "how it could have come into my wife's possession. She must, I suppose, have known your wife—years ago, of course."

It was upon the tip of his tongue to ask the lady's maiden name. But it occurred to him that she was possibly a person of whom her husband might not be proud. He held his peace.

Lord Boisragon took up the shoe. He turned it over in a large palm.

"Arthur's, I suppose," he said with a softened look. "He's grown since then." He smiled gently.

Then replying to Sir Nigel:

"Yes, the ladies must have known one another. The world's a small place after all, Harland."

Suddenly his face lightened. He started forward in his chair.

"She must be dead," he said in a tense voice. "As long as she lives a woman sticks to her marriage certificate, doesn't she? My wife must be dead."

"Do you mean to say you were in doubt? Do you mean to say you had lost sight of her?"

"We led a cat-and-dog life," the other explained sullenly. "I couldn't have stood it another day. She came back to England."

"Leaving Arthur with you?"

"Yes." He laughed coarsely. "Thankful to be rid of him. I didn't marry an angel."

"Few of us do," Sir Nigel said. "No reason why we should," he added sombrely. "One would have thought her people would at all events have sent you news of her death," he added.

The other shot him a shifty glance. He stirred uneasily in his chair. He made a little exclamatory sound.

Sir Nigel's gaze had reverted half unconsciously to the paper before him. Suddenly his eyes became keen. He took it up and examined it closely. From it he looked to Boisragon. Every marking of his clear-cut face became more marked. His nostrils dilated. His shoulders lifted. He passed back the certificate to its owner.

"Have you been carefully through it?" he asked quietly. "Read it again."

He watched the other's face with eyes like spear points. As he came to the end and laid it down,

"Well?" he questioned sharply.

"It's perfectly right," Boisragon said. He glanced inquiringly at his friend. His glance asked what he had expected him to find.

"*Perfectly right!*" Sir Nigel repeated incredulously. There was a half minute of portentous silence. Then he resumed quietly:

"Do you see that the lady's name is given as Geraldine Mary Louisa Crampton?" Boisragon dropped his heavy eyes.

"I suppose you knew her," he said awkwardly. "People didn't suspect there was anything between us. We were second cousins. It was a deuce of a business."

Sir Nigel gave a sharp quick laugh.

"Were there two Geraldine Mary Louisa Cramptons?" he demanded.

"Not that I ever heard of," Boisragon said, staring at him. "My wife was Lord Drumferline's third daughter."

Sir Nigel shook his head.

"There is a mistake somewhere," he said, "a serious mistake. Lord Drumferline's daughter Geraldine is my wife."

Boisragon started. His heavy face became blank, as though astonishment had shaken it empty of thought.

"How can that be?" he submitted tonelessly. "I married her the 10th of June, 1874. It's all there." He pointed to the certificate. He put out a large hand and caught it up. He had an air of not intending to let it go again from his possession.

Sir Nigel set his teeth.

"I married her," he said, "on the 5th of May, 1876."

"Drumferline's third daughter?"

"Drumferline's third daughter. You will find it in Burke. Everybody knows it."

The two men sat staring at one another across the table. Then a ray of light darted into Boisragon's heavy face. He shrugged a shoulder.

"You married her two years later," he exclaimed. "She must have married you when she got back. She'd do it as cool as a cucumber. And you never had any suspicion?"

"Do you mean to tell me," Sir Nigel demanded, "that you are stating facts? That Geraldine, having been married to you in Brisbane, two years later was married to me in England?"

"What else is there to think? As sure as death she and I were legally married in St. James' Church, Brisbane, a few days after we landed."

"After you landed?" Sir Nigel repeated. "Do you mean to say that when you left England for Australia Geraldine Crampton went with you? Do you mean to tell me Drum-

ferline allowed her to go to Australia with you? My dear man, the story is untenable. How could I believe it?"

There was a silence, protracted and poignant. During it Boisragon several times shifted in his chair and breathed harshly.

"Look here, Harland," he said. "It's no good making any bones about it. I suppose you've got to know the truth. Lord! was there ever such a situation? To think of her marrying you while I was still alive!"

"I am waiting for the truth," Sir Nigel said, his eyes burning in his face.

"The truth," Boisragon echoed. He moistened his lips. He laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, well," he continued, "I suppose you've got to have it. Look here. It's no news to you that I was a bit wild in those days. She and I were thrown together a good deal. I was stopping in the house. And we used to go off for long days, boating and that. Well—I needn't tell you what youth is. I suppose we lost our heads. She was very fascinating and—well, the long and short of it is we lost our heads. There could be no question of marriage between us, of course. I had nothing. The old Lord would have kicked me out at such a notion. He expected her to make a good match."

"Well?"

"Oh, well," he went on, "the next thing was that I was sent abroad to do what I could—a black sheep my family wasn't proud of. You remember it all. There was a flare-up about some bill I'd put my name to and couldn't meet. They gave me an outfit, bought me a beggarly ranch—you should have seen what it turned out to be—and packed me off to the Antipodes."

"But Geraldine?"

"I'm coming to her. Well, the long and short of it is that the day after the vessel sailed Geraldine turned up in my cabin. There was a hell of a scene. It turned out there was a baby coming. She was afraid to stop and face the music. So she had taken her passage in my boat and bolted. What she told her people Lord knows—anything of course but the truth. She gave me several versions of what she told them. I was caught in a trap. She threatened all sorts of

things—threatened to throw herself overboard. We were married as soon after the vessel got in as the law allowed."

"And Arthur?"

Boisragon's face fell. His paternal affection was his one fair spot.

"Arthur was born five months after we landed," he said gloomily. He turned suddenly upon Sir Nigel.

"All this is in the strictest confidence. I won't have the boy told. Nobody must know."

"They are not likely to know from me," Sir Nigel answered grimly.

Lord Boisragon began to show relief. He had come nearly to the end of his story.

"There's little more to tell. We led a miserable life. Her temper—you'd know of course what her temper was—her flirtations, her extravagance—we were always fighting about one thing or another. We were both heartily sick of it by the time the boy came. It was agreed that she should return to England, that the marriage should be kept quiet. She was to go back to her people as though nothing had happened. I was fond of the little chap even then and wanted to keep him. She couldn't bear the sight of him. He stopped with me. She came back. From that day to this I've never heard a word of her."

"And you say that two years later, knowing herself to be your wife and the mother of your son, she married me as though nothing had happened."

There was a long silence. No pin dropped to point it. But the uneasy shifting of the sinner in his chair served equally.

"I suppose it's only fair to her that you should know the truth," he said haltingly.

"Yes, let us have the truth," Sir Nigel said.

"You'll call me a blackguard. I suppose I was," the sinner said with a species of desperation. "But I swear I didn't mean it so. I meant kindly by her. Because in a way I had ruined her life."

He waited. There was only silence.

"Well, a man I knew out there owned a local paper. I got him to set up an account of my death—telling how I'd

been thrown by a kicking horse. I got him to send it to her in a registered letter. He wrote at the same time saying he attended my funeral. He enclosed one or two little trinkets she had given me as proof. When she married you no doubt she honestly believed herself a widow. I never meant to return. I was as good as dead to her. Well, now, there's the truth at last. What do you think of it?"

Sir Nigel expressed no opinion.

"I confess it sounds blackguardly," Boisragon went on. "But I swear I never had a notion of complications like this. I should never have come back if it hadn't been for the boy. I swear to God I never meant to."

There was another long silence. One looking into the room and watching the two men's faces might have thought he could have heard the workings of their minds.

Then Sir Nigel said frigidly:

"I suppose all this is true. I suppose you *did* marry Geraldine?"

"It's true," Boisragon said. "The certificate and shoe being found in your house and in her possession prove it."

"Then the woman who for twenty years has borne my name and passed as my wife is not my wife at all—is your wife."

"That's it," Boisragon said, wiping his brows.

Sir Nigel's face was a study in emotions.

"What do you propose to do?" he asked.

"The only thing there is to do. She's my wife. She'll have to be acknowledged. Some explanation will have to be given. She will have to be brought here. She's quite an invalid," he added, with a show of eagerness. "I hear her mind is gone."

Sir Nigel bent a sickened face.

"It will cause a deuce of a scandal, of course," the other resumed. "That I don't care about. It don't matter a rap to me what my neighbours think of me. We shall be able to put some sort of a decent face on it. Some story about a mistake on account of my rumoured death. The thing it will prove, and that beyond a doubt, is Arthur's legitimacy. And that is all I care about."

Sir Nigel had been making up his mind. He now spoke.

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"There is another way," he said quietly. "To me there is something repulsive in involving a woman, a lady, a helpless invalid in such a scandal. All sorts of things will be said."

He paused. He went on :

"She has been with me all these years. Let her remain. Nothing need be said. No purpose can be served by explanations. Let the truth be buried this day between you and me, and never again revived."

Lord Boisragon sat staring at him with his starting eyes. He did not for a moment realise the chivalry involved. He was merely amazed by the unexpectedness.

"But she is my wife!" he ejaculated blankly.

"Of what consequence whose wife she is? Her mind is gone. She is like a dead woman. Let us leave her where she is."

Boisragon started up. His lethargy gave way to senseless violence.

"By God, it shall be as I say. It's my affair solely," he cried. He struck the table with a fist.

"She's my wife. It's my affair. I'll settle it as I choose. I'll put a stop once for all to all the lies. They shall see Arthur's mother living here, my acknowledged wife, his acknowledged mother. Arthur is going to the deuce with all the talk. Nothing but this will stop it." He paused.

He resumed more calmly :

"As for her—her mind is gone. She won't know what is said. She won't care whether she's here or there. Harland, you may talk till doomsday. It won't make any difference. I've decided once for all. Arthur is my only consideration. He's proud and sensitive. He's felt the talk horribly. He shall be set right with the world. It might play the deuce with him if he isn't. Between us we can make a plausible, creditable story."

Argument was fruitless. He would not listen.

He went to the sideboard for more brandy. He returned.

"You can thank the Lord you've got no son," he resumed doggedly. "Because I swear, even if you had, and though I like you, it would have been the same. Arthur shall be set

right. They shall know not only that he is legitimate, they shall know his mother was a person of family. One might think you'd be thankful to be rid of her. I tell you I'm thankful enough she's—what she is. If she had all her powers, and it meant renewing the old life, I swear I'd think twice before relieving you of her."

Sir Nigel took his leave disgusted.

## CHAPTER XLII.

## AT LAST.

In some sort Love is greater than God.

He walked home briskly. His brain was in a whirl. He went over all the years of burden and misery he had endured. He recalled the early days of his union. With him, as with Boisragon, his partner's temper, her vanity, her humiliating flirtations, her selfish exactions, had made his life intolerable.

Suddenly he stopped short in the road. He felt his brain rock. Boisragon's words returned to him: "You can thank the Lord you've got no son . . . because it would have been the same."

Heavens! If that wish of his heart had been realised! If the boy he had regretted all those years, had been granted him, had grown to man's estate—for this to happen!

If one has at any time offered a thanksgiving from the very foundations of his being, surely he had reason to do so at that moment. That which had been the thorn now showed as the crowning mercy of his life.

He walked on. His shocked mind slowly regained its equilibrium. Such a crisis, topsy-turvying as this would do all the circumstances of existence, comes but seldom to a man. But the fortitude which was his habit served him now. For all his idealism he was a man of the world, and had passed his life among circumstances.

He accepted the situation. There was nothing else to do. He was glad he had made that proposal to Boisragon.

He felt he could not have done less. Although she had deceived him, she had, perhaps, honestly believed herself free to marry him. The prospect of the inevitable explanations bit acridly into his pride.

Then his mind gave him to himself as a free man. He saw Pentagel delivered of its skeleton. He saw his home once more a home, and not a torture-house.

A vision of Camilla swept into possession. In a moment he was filled to the hilt with passionate sweetness. The barrier between them had gone down. The marriage-bond, no more than a shred of legal tape, had snapped.

His wife was Boisragon's wife, which meant he had no wife. Having no wife he was free to take a wife. So his brain framed the simplicities. They were simplicities to stun, so much was bound up in them.

Within the course of days that nightmare sick-room, with its rose-pink furnishings and its death atmosphere, would have passed from his life. Within the course of days he would be free to set in its place the most tender, sweet, and sacred happiness by which man's life could be blessed.

It was in his power to transform within an hour the wistful pallor of Camilla's face, the longing of her faithful eyes, to a glory of happiness.

In the flood-tide of passion which succeeded upon shock he was glad, with a great exultancy, that Boisragon had rejected his proposal. Let the dead bury its dead! he reflected vehemently. He had paid, overpaid, his due to that poor skeleton of his house. Here now was Camilla to be thought of, Camilla, who loved him so sweetly and so well.

As he walked with the thought of her, another thought surged. He would no longer be sonless. The home of his fathers should not now pass into stranger hands. Camilla, God willing, should give him his son. The clean and clever youngster he had dreamed of for so many years should be his Camilla's.

For a moment he pictured her fair and proud, her dark head bent, her eyes filled with a sacred joy, a new and lovely wonder in her face, a noble mother with a baby at her breast.

Such moments remit years of carking grief.

Arrived at Pentagel, he set aside his tender thoughts. From the clouds he reverted to the commonplace.

Ashby, the agent, met him in the hall. In his hands were plans for a batch of new cottages, to combine all the latest sanitary methods with picturesque construction. He went over the details with punctilious attention. He suggested improvements, discovered faults. His quick mind found economies.

Ashby did not even notice that his eyes were strangely shining.

\* \* \* \* \*

Camilla, more intuitive, Camilla, accustomed to glean every tone of his voice, every light and shadow in his face, on which to feed long absences, saw a change in him the moment he came to the sick-room.

She noticed how, on opening the door, he halted for an instant on the threshold. As he stood in the shadow his eyes blazed toward her like two flames.

He passed on to the invalid. Another perceptible moment he halted and regarded her. Camilla's mind retained all day the inexplicable nature of that look. It was a thing to ponder over. But, having no clue, her ponderings led her nowhere.

When he had read his letters and paper to obstinately closed eyes, and half the time to sharp, exasperating cries and the restless beating of a hand, he came down the room to where Camilla sat.

She had completed her dressings for the day. She was writing a letter.

He stood beside the table. She felt the blood steal into her cheeks. She smiled, but did not raise her eyes. The point of the pen in her hand became unsteady in the magnetic current radiating from him. She realised that his lightning glance might make the tremulous point an index to her perturbations. She laid down the pen.

She looked up. Her eyes dropped at what she saw in his face. She caught her breath.

"You are as sensitive as mercury *in vacuo*," he said. "One cannot set eyes upon you but your hand trembles or you change colour."

"It is a silly symptom," she returned. "I will ask Dr. Brattleton to give me a tonic."

"Pooh!" he said, "you need no tonic. It requires no doctor to read perfect health in you. Camilla! Why do you dissemble?"

"What do I dissemble?" she demanded, with an affectation of surprise. She raised her eyes again. Again they dropped before the glow of his.

"You pretend that my coming is a matter of indifference to you. You go on writing letters as though you were wholly unconscious of my presence. You do not even vouchsafe me the civility of a glance. And when you do, you immediately afterwards drop your lids, as though I were an insignificance."

She lifted them, candid and shining. Their sincerity tempered the flame in his.

It was as though her lips had set a kiss of peace upon them. He sighed, an exhalation of the spirit. His face tranquillised.

"Are you writing love-letters?"

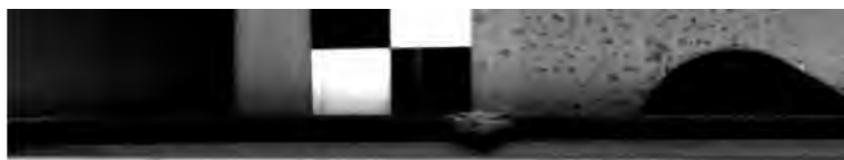
She shook her head.

"Poor Camilla!" he said. "It is a pity fate has denied her the delight of writing love-letters. I imagine she would have a pretty gift."

Her lip trembled. Her eyes yearned.

"One day," he continued, "before we part for ever, Camilla, you shall write me a love-letter. Only a fiction, of course. All that you say I will forget from the moment of reading. I will, when I have read it until I am tired—but not till I am tired—consign it to the flames. You shall hide it in a hollow tree or stuff it in the crevice of a rose-arbour, something that shall fitly suit its sentimental character. For an hour I will forbear to take it. There is pleasure in dalliance. You shall see me stalk about the spot like a caged tiger. You shall see me bite my lips and throttle my impatience. After that, I will satisfy my desire to make acquaintance with Camilla's pretty art of writing love-letters."

Her mind had stopped, fettered to one sentence. She had scarcely heard the remainder of his tender raillery.



## AT LAST.

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"You say when we 'part for ever.' But we are not going to part for ever. You are not going to send me away?"

"Why not?" he said. "Do I not find you at times with idle hands? Do you not treat the master of the house with disrespect? Do you suppose that tyrants permit their slaves to drop their lids and tilt their noses?"

"But seriously," she persisted, and her face was serious, "you do not think of sending me away."

"Heavens!" he cried, with savage tenderness. "How her face pales! How her eyes grow big! So little has life given to this poor slave of the lint that, like other slaves, she hugs her chains, thinks herself fortunate to spend her days in the air of a death-chamber, forever rolling bandages. What can your life have been," he demanded testily, "that you can content yourself with so little?"

"I love my work. I live in a beautiful house, in a beautiful country. Kindness and goodness are showered upon me."

"An egg for your breakfast, a cutlet for your lunch, perhaps a wing of chicken for your dinner. My worst claret—"

She began to protest. He held up a peremptory hand.

"I know you do not," he said. "But let me finish; it is symbolical. And if you should drink wine, Paget would take good care it should be of the worst. Let me see what other privileges are showered upon you. 'Showered' was your own ridiculous term. A drive, a walk, a snatched half-hour for writing love-letters. My dear girl, there is not a scullery-maid in the house who is not better off. You are Quixotic to be grateful for such beggarly scraps. You seem to forget that the most perfect of her sex has a right to ask the best from life."

She smiled.

"I do not acknowledge the fitness of the description," she said. "And in the list of my advantages you have left out—the best."

"What?" he demanded. Eagerness flashed to his eyes. A joy of sublimated self-consciousness gleamed in his face. "Tell me."

She shook her head.

"I insist."

"Well, then," she obeyed demurely. "Sometimes I have the sweetest things said to me. Sometimes I am called the most perfect of my sex. Or I am mistaken for Cleopatra, for Diana, and other illustrious personages. This pleases my vanity, transforms Page's poorest claret into nectar—"

"Remember, you do not drink wine," he objected, smiling.

"I know I do not," she returned. She mimicked delicately the irritable gesture he had made. "But let me finish. It is symbolical. And this best of all my privileges lightens the burdens and"—her voice dropped—"and glorifies life."

There was a long silence. Then he said in a tense voice:

"Camilla! If I, unworthy, ever reach Heaven, it will be because at this moment I have remitted the penalties of my worst sins in not taking you into my arms and kissing you a thousand times."

"No, no," she said. "We must be content with what we have."

"What have we?" he cried. Scorn trumpeted in his voice. "I stand in your presence with a table for ever between us. I look at you down the length of a sick-room. I pass long, solitary hours in the room below and think of your long solitary hours in the room above. 'What we have,' says she! Great Heaven! All she has is a meagre, unimaginative soul that is satisfied with snippings."

"There are people," she said gently, "who have no conception of anything so beautiful as I have known. There are women who believe themselves happily married, and yet have never imagined one iota of the happiness I feel when you come down the room and stand beside me—although the table is between us."

"But suppose, Camilla," he said, in a voice of fire; "suppose one day I should come down the room and there should be no table between us."

She put out a hand to defend herself from the sweetness of the thought. She steadied her voice.

"I may not be greedy," she said. "If I have more than many, surely it should be enough."

"If you had not the mind of a Dorcas you would not find it enough," he upbraided her—"the sterile imagination of a school-marm. Or are you a thin-blooded Puritan, who see sin in the tenderest ecstasies of this world, lest these endanger your position in another. Do you walk always in the shade lest you should too much enjoy the sunshine? Do you shut your eyes upon a glorious view, lest in beholding these they behold vanity? Would you plant the earth with cabbages instead of flowers? Pooh! it is a fool philosophy! A blasphemy, which turns sourly from joy. It is a mouse-heart that fears to drain sweetness to the last drop, thank God for the draught, and go about his business a renewed and better man. There need be no dregs in the cup, my Camilla. Two persons who truly love will give one another only of their best. If I have feet of clay, surely I shall hide them most of all from 'my soul's idol, my celestial.' Yet Camilla purses her lips and thinks herself safest from me with a table between us."

She brushed tears from her lashes.

"Did I purse my lips?" she questioned faintly. "I did not mean to purse my lips. Oh," she broke out, "please, will you go away?"

"There, now," he said compunctionously. "I tease you. I am sorry. See, now I am going. But not till you have dried your tears, and smile. Camilla, when I come to look at you again I believe, after all, you are no Dorcas. Dorcas never had such eyes. School-marms have not lips like you."

Peace was restored. They remained smiling at one another for some moments. Then he turned:

"Forgive my teasing," he appealed. "I tease to set you up in arms against me. It serves our purpose better than a table."

\* \* \* \* \*

Some days later he found her early sitting on the rocks. Her thoughts were upon the horizon. She did not hear him till he stood beside her. She sprang up.

"I was just going in," she said. She consulted her watch. "It is late."

He had his bathing suit and towels.

"And I," he said, "am on my way for a swim."

The breeze had blown her dark hair into rings and tendrils. The air and the sun had brought a lovely colour to her cheeks. Her eyes showed that freshness and depth which come of looking upon the depth and freshness of great ocean.

He looked into her face. His own flashed into an exultant smile. She was conscious of something unfathomable in the look. For days there had been that in him she could not understand.

They parted and went their ways. A minute later she felt an arm set suddenly round her. He drew her about and stood with her face to face. Where they stood they were screened from view by the cliffs.

"I will not wait another hour," he said. "I meant to delay telling you until all should have been arranged. Why should I keep good news from you?"

He told her the facts.

She listened bewildered, incredulous. Had it not been for the corroborative evidence of the secret cupboard, she could scarcely have believed so improbable a story, even though he told it.

"I heard last night from Boisragon," he said. "He is coming to-day to see—her. You would have had to know. It will be your task to dispose of Benson during the interview. Not a word is to be said until the arrangements are completed."

He watched the struggling emotions of her face. It was shocked, stunned, grave.

"Now," he said suddenly and authoritatively. "Set all that aside and come to the question as it affects you and me. We have behaved very decently. We have now a right to be as happy as we may. I am as free as you. You are as free as I." He smiled. "Do I too much flatter myself, Camilla, when I suppose that presently you will consent to be my wife?"

She could not speak. She put her hands in his.

He removed his linen cap. The fine, imaginative head was bared and bent. Seeming part of the morning sunlight there was a tender, chivalrous light upon it.

In such vital moments one sees everything, the whole and the part, standing out in luminous clearness. She saw beneath the glowing chivalry of his features the lines which age and grief had graven there. She saw his hair glistening grey above the temples. She saw, behind the joy rays of his eyes, deeps which pain had crystallised.

"And now," he said, drawing a quick breath, "you shall give me your lips, Camilla, without a thought of anyone but you and me. The table is gone."

Who can convey by words the perfume of the rose, the exquisiteness of the lily-chalice, the glory of the sunrise? We speak of pinks and whites and clouds and odours. But to what extent would these inform one who had not seen and known? Words carry us but to the door of the highest emotions, and leave us fumbling at the latch.

Camilla gave him sweet and tender lips. His own took full and masterful possession. But the magic of the meeting, the swooning of soul in soul, the tender ecstasy, divinely ordained to register in sweet amazement the communion of two hearts, are things whereof the greater part is on the other side of that door whereat the writer is unable to do more than to set the reader fumbling at the latch.

When it was over (if one may describe in the singular that which was compounded of so many things) his face was transfigured.

"If there is a God in Heaven, dear," he said, with a whimsical tenderness, "it is no blasphemy to think He just now envied me."

He went his way with bared head.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

## HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Some men are honest and unselfish all their lives ; which perhaps means that they remain in love . . . all their lives. They are rare, of course. But the sort of woman with whom it is possible to remain in love all through a lifetime is rarer.

WERE every man in the world in love (as no doubt it is meant he should forever be) there would be no poverty, no crime, no disease, no ugliness, no cruelty. The lion would lie down with the lamb. And a little child should lead them.

Man in love is man at his meridian. The wildernesses of his nature bloom as the rose at the welling of the sacred spring. It is his Nile, which fructifies the arid places. The mean man becomes generous, the cruel man kind, the bully gentle, the coward lion-hearted. The mindless man feels wings of imagination stirring amid his brain cells. The poet descends from the heights to find pence in his pockets for the poor.

The millennium will not come about by making women Prime Ministers or Samsons. The millennium will be when woman shall have grown so divinely clever as to inspire man with a perpetual tender passion for her. That flame will make porcelain of the crudest clay. All carbon shall then become diamond.

As Camilla walked home in the sunlight, she was possessed by an enchanted sense that roses red and of an intoxicating fragrance sprang beneath her feet. Under the magic of her

Beloved's kiss, her nature burgeoned suddenly into a riot of bloom. In a tender amazement she looked to see her finger-tips sprout rose-buds. Her breaths came and went like perfumed spells.

She felt her mouth to be some sweet mystical flower which his mouth had kissed open. She was half fearful lest when she should attempt to speak, like the girl in the fairy story, not words but pearls and diamonds should scatter from her lips.

Her whole being was transformed. She thrilled. She trembled. She felt like a breeze, like a flame. Her eyes shot mysterious light.

She moved in a dream. She was clothed with joy as with a garment. She paid no heed whither she went. Yet her limbs, nature-taught of the mystery of her bewilderment, faithfully bore her home.

She drew down her head from the clouds. She sighed to find herself again on earth with a clock confronting her.

She ran quickly upstairs. It was five minutes to breakfast-time, and Nurse Hanson regarded it always as a personal affront when she was late.

She flung off her hat and cloak. She unbound her hair and combed roses and sunbeams out of it. They seemed to lie, a shower of spangled blossoms on the carpet.

Blushing, she moistened her sponge and strove to scrub away the flower-like carmine of her lips. It seemed to her that all the world must see his kisses in it. She set her cap and collar with extreme exactness, in order to distract attention from her rare tints. Then she ran down to breakfast.

"I was just thinking you were going to be late," Miss Hanson said in a grumbling voice. "And I've been to early celebration and am famished." She sat down and began to pour coffee.

Odd as it would have seemed, Camilla in her overflowing happiness had been about to kiss her. She was in a mood to kiss the door-posts of the house; to touch all things with gentle hands. Her fingers had become caresses. Love had thrown so wide the chambers of her heart, that she felt no less than all the world could fill them.

Her colleague's tones, however, set an effectual check upon

her transports. She recalled herself and began to cut bread and to pass plates.

"I'm worried again about Cicero," Miss Hanson said, with a fold between her brows. "He is not at all himself this morning. I was in two minds about missing the service and stopping at home with him. But it seemed wrong."

"I hope he is not going to be ill again," Camilla said. "He seemed lively enough yesterday."

"Oh, he's not going to be ill," his mistress protested peevishly. "Pray don't suggest anything so unpleasant. His appetite is excellent. It is himself I am considering. He seems less affectionate. He snaps his teeth. Sometimes he lashes his pretty tail. I don't know if that is a sign of anger. It is I know with lions. For nearly a week he has seemed listless and dull. I can't think how I can have offended him."

"I suppose even rats have moods," Camilla said, smiling.

"But pray don't call him a rat," her colleague objected, with a little shudder. "He isn't the least bit like one. It's absurd to call him so."

"You will find he will come to himself again," Camilla re-assured her.

She sighed, consoled.

"He will, I believe. I have never seen any sign of real fickleness or temper in him."

She proceeded to enjoy her breakfast. She said presently with some concern:

"You're not eating anything. The omelette this morning is delicious. I can't think what the flavour is. But it is simply delicious."

She laid down her fork. "Why, when I come to look at you," she said, nodding her head portentously, "I believe you have a touch of fever. The moment I saw you I thought there was something wrong. Your cheeks are flushed. Your eyes are bright. After breakfast I shall take your temperature."

Camilla laughed.

"It is nothing more serious than sun and wind. I went down early to the sea and sat on the rocks. I feel splendidly well."

"No headache?"

"Not the least."

"Well! it may be that, of course. But it would be wiser to let me take your temperature."

\* \* \* \* \*

Benson was not well enough to rise. Mrs. Merritt assisted Camilla to dress the patient. She had little to do, she said, and it was not fair to rob Nurse Hanson of her sleep. She, too, inquired of Camilla whether she was feeling well.

"You are flushed," she said, her eyes dwelling on the nurse's brilliant colour. Camilla was aware of an under-current in her thoughts. She knew that the housekeeper had for some time been keeping a lady-like watch upon her.

"I am perfectly well," she insisted. She repeated her explanation. "I was out early and sat on the rocks in the sun."

"Sir Nigel went out early this morning," Mrs. Merritt said quietly. "You would not meet him, I suppose."

"I did," Camilla said. "He was going down for a swim, he said."

She was glad that neither by tone nor feature had she betrayed the slightest sign of what the meeting had meant.

Mrs. Merritt, scanning her closely, for the twentieth time acquitted the beautiful nurse of interest in her employer.

One of the most difficult things in the world is for a woman without beauty to believe that a woman who possesses it is not perpetually employing it for the subjugation of the other sex. Sometimes, of course, she is!

"Sir Nigel tells me," Mrs. Merritt resumed presently, "that Lord Boisragon is coming this morning, and particularly wishes to see her ladyship. He knew her years ago."

She had a clear and somewhat incisive way of talking. Even very deaf persons heard her.

Camilla saw a spark of comprehension light the invalid's face. Her eyes, which had been closed, dropped suddenly open. She stared dully at the speaker.

She had consented dumbly to the dress they showed her. She had chosen her jewels.

Now, however, she began to moan and beat her hands. She broke into shrill cries.

Camilla had learned to interpret her wishes more quickly than Benson even.

"I am sorry you will have double trouble," she told Mrs. Merritt. "But she does not like her gown. We shall have to put her into another."

Half-a-dozen were spread before she made her selection. The dull eyes chose presently in their unmistakable fashion a robe of crimson satin embroidered with sequins.

It took half an hour to put her into it. To judge from her protests, the change occasioned her considerable pain. Mrs. Merritt, with a slight superior smile, applied two rouge spots to the cheeks. Camilla sprinkled three varieties of perfume. The poor soul was ready for her levée.

Mrs. Merritt departed. She would pay a visit, she said, to Benson.

Camilla was left alone with the patient and with her thoughts. She had work to keep them within bounds. How could she sit quiet when her heart was spreading wings? How could she see to snip with eyes which scintillated joy?

His bondage was over. The lonely desolation of his life was at an end. How she would make him happy! How she would, so help her Heaven! reward him with tender devotion and loyalty for all that he had suffered!

As the hour for Lord Boisragon's visit approached, she realised that an interview, perhaps extremely painful, was impending. One could not know how the sudden return into her life of Talbot Colville would affect the invalid. The uncertainty as to her mental powers, their scope and acuteness, made it impossible to forecast the issue. Yet as likely as not, she would not remember him, would meet him with eyes in which there was no recognition, or it might be with obdurately dropped lids.

While she wondered a knock sounded. Sir Nigel entered. Behind him, with a scared, inquisitive face, came Boisragon.

Sir Nigel stepped back to lock the door. Boisragon shrank close to him, rolling his handkerchief into a ball with nervous hands.

Mechanically, like one walking in his sleep, he followed Sir Nigel to the couch. There came a silence so charged with agitations that it must have had a specific gravity. Then:

"Oh, good God!" Camilla heard him cry out violently, "Good God! I didn't know it was so bad as that."

Involuntarily she looked up.

She saw his large white face terror-struck and shocked. His prominent eyes strained painfully. He caught at the back of a chair to steady his shaking limbs. Sir Nigel stood grave, and deeply moved.

"Is she alive?" Boisragon broke out again in a voice falsetto-shrill with disgust and fear. Then in an angry shriek: "Is it to mock me you have tricked her out like this?"

Sir Nigel took him by an arm, and slightly shook him.

"For Heaven's sake, Boisragon," he protested in a low voice, "be careful what you say. To an extent she hears and understands."

But Boisragon had lost control. His face was distorted. His eyeballs protruded. He swayed as he stood, clutching at the chair-back.

Suddenly he called out violently:

"For God's sake take her away. See, Harland, see, she's opening her eyes. The dead woman's opening her eyes. For God's sake, take her away."

He stood in a frenzy, his limbs working convulsively.

Camilla rose, and running down the room, caught hold of one of his arms.

"You must come away," she said, in a voice of authority. "You will frighten her."

With quiet force, Sir Nigel helping her, she drew him to a window, and, turning him with his back to the invalid, forced him into a chair. He sat shivering and shaking like a man with ague, his hands and face livid. Yet his skin was moist and beaded with perspiration.

Camilla mixed a restorative draught and gave it to him. He drank it eagerly. Slowly he regained control.

"Frightfully sorry," he muttered brokenly. "Abominable of me, I know. But I never had such a shock. Harland, I hope I didn't distress her. You said 'changed.' You didn't tell me—— My God!"

Suddenly above his talk and the sounds of his chattering teeth there rang a muffled cry:

"Talbot! Talbot! Talbot!"

It seemed to cry across a century. It was like the voice of one entombed calling from the womb of mother earth. A voice well-nigh dead from disuse, all its mechanism clogged and halting, a voice that seemed to have its origin in dry bones, crying across from the years it had known to years it knew not. A ghostly, ghastly, terrible cry!

Camilla's blood crept cold about her heart. Her hair lifted. Boisragon, shuddering, buried his ears. Sir Nigel shivered. They found her trembling like a leaf, a glare of terror in her eyes, her mouth drawn to a grin. Yet, even so, there was a sort of furtive concealment in the look she turned upon Sir Nigel and Camilla when they went and stood beside her. Her glances wildly searched the room. But she showed the wit to drop them at intervals with her accustomed apathy, as though she were trying to hide with her ragged remnants of intelligence the arisen spectre of her life.

Camilla and Sir Nigel exchanged looks. Her eyes found in his an affirmative to the question hers had asked. Soundlessly she slipped away, and bringing a screen, she set it about the foot of the couch. Then she went back to Lord Boisragon and laying a finger on her lips and a hand upon his arm, she motioned to him that he must go.

He had quite recovered. He rose, and with the lightness and alertness of which stout men are capable, he stole past the couch under cover of the screen and quietly quitted the room.

The patient could not see the door from where she lay. But she heard the key turn in the lock.

She started forward and perceived the screen. She darted an angry hand at it. She began to moan. Her eyes fastened on it as though she suspected something behind it.

Camilla quietly removed it.

She shot one terrible glance into space. She emitted a moan of relief. Then she fell back exhausted on her pillows, and dropped at once asleep.

Sir Nigel went out without a word.

Later he received an incoherent scrawl from Boisragon, a jumble of apologies, explanations and excuses. The sight of her, after all those years, so changed, had been too much for him. He apologised profusely for having lost his head. He begged a respite. He begged time to accustom

himself to the notion of her so changed. He was afraid to consider the effect of her appearance upon Arthur. He besought Harland to consider Arthur and give him time to prepare the boy. He had not swerved, of course, from his determination to acknowledge his wife, and once for ever stop the lying tongues. He only asked for time. He begged Sir Nigel to allow her to remain at Pentagel a week or two longer.

Sir Nigel showed the letter to Camilla.

"I consented, of course," he said, "although reluctantly. My method is to do quickly anything that has to be done."

The invalid appeared to lose all recollection of the scene. She awoke from sleep in her normal mood.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following day she refused her lunch. Camilla went down to the library.

"Come in," Sir Nigel cried resonantly the moment she knocked. Fanny came bounding toward her barking a challenge.

His face was alight with life and happiness. He was humming to himself above a batch of serious-looking documents.

He let his voice trail off. He stood regarding her with whimsical eyes.

"Come up the room and deliver your message with due ceremony," he said. "Do not be shy. My dear girl, why do you look so shy? Do you think I am going to kiss you?"

She sturdily denied the imputation, although to tell the truth, she was less confident than she said.

"I admit a strong temptation," he confessed. "But I have learned the art of waiting. In a house like this, every door has eyes, every wall ears. I will not have a whisper. When the time comes, not a soul shall be able to say, 'He always had eyes for her!' Presently, Camilla, I will make up for my lost chances, for stupid silences and insipid good-mornings."

She delivered her message.

"I will come at once," he said cheerfully. "Poor soul! I wonder if Boisragon will be able to manage her."

He went swiftly down the room. He caught Camilla up. He caught her hand and pressed it. In a moment she had

turned and carried his hand to her lips. She laid her cheek to it. Her soul was flooded with tenderness.

She dropped it and stood with face downcast and blushes in her cheeks.

"Poor Camilla!" he said with profound tenderness. "Dear, are you fond of me?"

The poignant tender voice pierced to her very soul. She choked. She lifted shining, swimming eyes.

"Do I seem like a cold-blooded brute?" he said. He drew a quick breath. "Some day, Camilla, when you find how faithfully I have registered every kiss foregone to pay myself presently tenfold, you will think differently. In that day, it is you, my dear, who will cry 'Enough!' At present—Camilla, I know the world better than you. Quick, now, let me open the door.

Mrs. Merritt had come in to assist Benson with the patient. When Sir Nigel had succeeded in reducing her to reason, he turned to leave.

Before leaving he addressed Camilla.

"Nurse," he said ceremoniously, his face cold, his eye authoritative, "Your cousins, Mrs. Drummond and her daughter, are dining here this evening. Will you give us the pleasure of your company?"

She stood wounded to the quick. All at once he made a stranger of her.

Her impulse was to proudly refuse. She accepted, however, with ceremony equal to his.

Mrs. Merritt, who had been observing them, appeared relieved.

"He means it kindly, Nurse," she said, when he had gone. "Sometimes his manner is formal and rather alarming. But, of course, it is kind of him to ask you."

"I was afraid you were going to refuse, Nurse Braeburn," Benson said. "You've offended him some way. I could tell it by his voice. You must try and make up with him again. We don't want to lose you."

Suddenly Camilla understood. After all, as he had said, he knew the world better than she did.

## CHAPTER XLIV.

## ANOTHER DINNER-PARTY.

*Secret de deux, secret de Dieu.*

SHE did not drive that afternoon. Instead she went to her room, and, having locked her door, wasted two foolish, happy hours in trying new fashions for her hair. She found all so becoming that she could scarcely choose.

The new glow which love had set upon her raised her looks above the province of detail.

She decided at last upon a mode because it differed most from that she ordinarily wore. She felt that such a day should be marked by a deviation in every particular from other days. The old life, the caps and aprons, the professional routine, the poultices and lotions, were to be for ever laid aside. She sighed gratefully upon the interest and happiness they had afforded her. But she realised that these had left unfulfilled her best and sweetest, very highest faculties.

Yet who would tend her sick and poor? She knew too well how soon her place would be filled to suppose she could be missed. She knew, too, that the sick and poor would be always with her. His life was compounded largely of philanthropies. She would join forces with him. Together they would make a Utopia of the neighbourhood.

So she mused and dreamed, and brushed her hair, and glanced, with smiles, into her mirror. She sang snatches of song in a low, happy voice.

She took out her dinner-gown and shook it from its folds. She was pleased to find it stand the test of a new standard she had raised, the standard of his approval.

Then she lost herself in happiness, remembering she was that evening to sit at meat with him.

It is said that love gives a fictitious value to things. The truth is that love gives their real value to things. The sun finds prismatic powers in them which makes a diamond of a drop of water or a bit of broken bottle. The power was there. It needed but the sun to find them.

Camilla was a proud and happy woman when some hours later she descended to the drawing-room. She carried the image her glass had given her with tender triumph to his eyes.

His face was grave, his greeting ceremonious. Nobody but she suspected the passionate thrill her appearance made in him. It shook her like a wind. She stood firm, however, in her satin slippers, composed and smiling.

Her milk-white throat and shoulders tingled with magnetic sweetness to the unwonted touch of his eyes. Yet her eyes were not quick enough to detect that his had levelled a glance below her face.

She passed on and seated herself beside Gwendolen Treherne. She and her father were the only guests who had arrived.

Gwendolen looked pale and pretty in an Empire gown. The new wistfulness was in her eyes. Camilla saw them turn frequently upon the door.

She wished for her sake that Arthur Colville might be coming. But she was sure that for the present Sir Nigel would not invite him to meet the Drummonds.

She was right. Yet Gwendolen's eyes were rewarded. Camilla, chatting with her, presently saw the pupils dilate with a little flash of happiness. The colour deepened in her cheeks. She began to talk with animation.

Arthur came in with the Drummonds. He looked confused, reluctant.

"I had almost to drag him in," Mrs. Drummond announced to Sir Nigel in her pleasant, fluty voice, which seemed tuned to round off social contredémps. "We

arrived at the same moment. And when he found you would not be alone, he was making off at full speed. I was sure you would be vexed if he did not remain."

"I'm frightfully sorry, Sir," Arthur explained, summoning his engaging smile. "I did not know you were giving a party. I expected you'd be alone. Father is out of sorts, and I came to beg you to give me a dinner. When I found there were other people, I was making off, of course. Of course, I'll go back and join Father." He made steps in retreat.

Sir Nigel took his arm and drew him forward.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he said. "I'm delighted to have you. Go and talk to Miss Braeburn and Gwen while I command Mrs. Drummond for capturing another guest for me."

Nesta was not looking her best. She wore scarlet, which jarred with her pinks. The frock had been an experiment. It proved a failure. She would not have worn it had she known Arthur would be present. Sir Nigel had told her that only the Trehernes and Camilla, with St. John Camboyne and a friend of his, were expected. As for Mr. Treherne, she seldom troubled to notice him further than to shake hands with him on entering and leaving. St. John, the youngest of the Pendaubyn house, was a detrimental, a needy naval officer, with little beyond his pay.

He came in at the last moment, red-haired, lanky and good-natured. He had run all the way, he said, to keep himself in training. He had scarcely breath to explain to his host that his friend, Colonel Warden, who had been also invited, had broken his collar-bone that afternoon, and could not, therefore, come. He still panted as he gave his arm to Nesta.

He did so with an admiring deference which got but scant encouragement from her serene imperiousness.

Camilla was taken in by Mr. Treherne. Arthur and Gwendolen brought up the rear.

Unalloyed joy is incompatible with social amenities. Camilla wished only to sit quiet to enjoy to the full the novel happiness of being Sir Nigel's guest. She wished only to look at him, only to listen to him. It seemed to

her that only he and she were in the room. The others moved and spoke like persons in a drama.

While she forced civil conventions in response to her neighbour's rather trite remarks, she caught snatches of Sir Nigel's conversation. He was in a golden mood, his face alight, his voice charged with fire and intensity, now ironic, caustic, uttering clever paradox or witty cynicism, now persuasive, flexible, genial.

Presently all the table was listening to him, all that was but the one who most craved liberty to do so, and the other who withheld that liberty.

Mr. Treherne was nothing if not conventional. He regarded it as his bounden duty to entertain his dinner-partner by a flow of commonplaces, punctuated by timely intervals to allow discussion of the good things of the *menu*.

"Sir Nigel seems in spirits this evening," he observed presently. There was a shade of annoyance on his face. His vigilant eyes had detected that the last banality he had been at the trouble of evolving was received with a smile, obviously forced and with absent eyes.

Then the whole table, Camilla also, broke into laughter at some sally of their host. Treherne looked up with a blank face.

"Eh, what was it?" he inquired. "I did not catch it. I was myself talking."

Camilla recalled her truant wits.

"I had to listen," she apologised. "Sir Nigel mentioned the name of somebody I know."

She repeated the story to him. He laughed mechanically. Your truly inquisitive person is without sense of humour.

"Very quaint," he said. "Exceedingly quaint. Though it seems rather obtuse of the man not to have found a remark more apropos."

"Of course!" Camilla said. "But the point of the story is that his remark was so especially *mal à propos*."

"It was indeed," Mr. Treherne assented earnestly. "I should think it must have considerably startled the lady. But now you must listen to the end of my Cornish legend. I had got to where the devil said to the miller, 'Very well,

## ANOTHER DINNER-PARTY. 325

if you will you will, and there's an end on't, but I'm going to keep my part of the bargain.'"

Camilla, repentant for past inattentions, became all ears, and presently laughed in the right place.

Her companion was mollified.

"Yes! We've got some good legends here," he said, with a dry smile. "I must tell you about the old beggar-woman and the hedgehog. It is long, but very characteristic."

Camilla sighed within her soul for that inimitable voice which was luring her ears with a charm irresistible.

Then, with an heroic effort, she let the deliciousness slip and gave all her attention to the legend of the beggar-woman and the hedgehog.

Once, while her ears were dutifully chained, her eyes looked up to meet Sir Nigel's. In that instant, although he continued to speak without halt or change, his eyes as they looked and glanced away conveyed a thousand things, greeting, joy, eternal comradeship, immeasurable content. Moreover, they spoke a whimsical sympathy for that he detected through her smiles and animation to be merely boredom.

Mr. Treherne, seeing her face pale, and the eyes raised to him dilate with sudden wistfulness, thought he had never before revealed the histories of the beggar-woman and the hedgehog to a more appreciative listener.

At last it was over. Sir Nigel signalled to Mrs. Drummond. Arthur broke off in a friendly passage-at-arms with Gwendolen and sprang to the door. The ladies repaired to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Drummond thrust a plump, warm arm within Camilla's.

"You look charming," she said. "The Camelcarbis air is wonderful. You were growing into a pale nun with worried eyes. You have bloomed into a beauty. Why don't you marry Mr. Treherne? He admires you. I am sure he admires you. He is extremely eligible, and quite agreeable. It is absurd for you to go on nursing. As for your prospects, with your present looks, of course, no woman, who wasn't a fool, born or manufactured, would engage you as a nurse. Not, that is, if she had masculine belongings.

And most of the women who can afford to employ nurses have, you know."

Camilla laughed happily.

"I will give Mr. Treherne my careful consideration," she said. "His way of staring would be a trial, I confess. Caroline," she rallied her, "it is very magnanimous of you to present me with an admirer of your own."

"Pooh!" she retorted. But she smiled a flattered smile. "You know my views. I'm too comfortable to exchange my freedom for responsibility. How do you like Nesta in red?"

"I don't," Camilla said. "It is too strong a colour for her delicacy."

"I am glad you agree. She and I both think so. She had to try it as it is going to be fashionable."

She sighed.

"I must tell you we are off next week. She is beginning to be bored. Tuesday is the First. We are going a round of shooting parties. I hope to goodness she will settle herself."

"Is Arthur quite out of the question?"

Mrs. Drummond's face set.

"Quite," she returned, with an air of not wishing to discuss the subject further.

When the men joined them, Arthur halted beside Nesta for a few minutes. But he seemed uneasy and constrained. His glances wandered to Gwendolen. Presently he followed his glances. He sat down beside her, and they were soon laughing and talking in frank, friendly fashion.

Nesta was far too socially experienced to betray any sign. She took up her favourite pose beside the fireplace, looking a little colourless, but very beautiful, in her ruddy dress. Young Camboyne sat at her feet—metaphorically. Mr. Treherne hovered near, his eyes straying to Camilla.

Sir Nigel joined Mrs. Drummond and Camilla.

For half an hour Camilla was wholly happy, saying little, absorbing with all her powers the charm of his voice, his culture, his gaiety, his humour, his varied experiences, his pithy reflections upon men and things.

Mrs. Drummond, who was herself clever enough to enjoy his cleverness, sat delighted.

"What spirits you have," she told him. "You make me feel young again."

"Then I do nothing more than point the obvious," he said.

"Miss Braeburn will miss you," he observed, looking at Camilla. "You must tell me your cousin's tastes that I may know how to console her for your desertion."

Mrs. Drummond laughed.

"Camilla is so odd," she said. "I believe she has no tastes beyond poultice making."

"Then we will order a supply of linseed meal," he retorted gravely. "I believe linseed meal is the basis of poultices, Miss Braeburn."

Camilla assented smiling. "But I have no taste," she protested, "for making poultices without a purpose."

"Then we will find purposes for your poultices." He turned to Mrs. Drummond. "Seriously though, is your cousin so profoundly prosaic, as you say? Does she not harbour one sentimental weakness?"

"She is nothing but a sentimental weakness," the lady laughed. "Otherwise how could she have chosen to pass her life among dirty common people in hospitals?"

"You and I find it difficult to understand," he said, sending a strange glance toward Camilla, sitting in her white dress under the lamplight.

"Perfectly impossible," Mrs. Drummond retorted.

"I only said 'difficult,'" he insisted drily. He began to speak of other things.

Camilla's happy evening fled on wings. She found herself presently bidding her cousins good-bye for some months. She would not see them again before their departure.

"Now! Mind not to forget my advice about Mr. Treherne," Mrs. Drummond whispered as she kissed her in the hall.

"I won't forget," Camilla assured her, smiling.

Nesta gave her a dry cheek and a cold hand. She did not approve of her cousin's transformation from "a pale nun, with worried eyes, into a beauty," as her mother had phrased it.

"I suppose you will soon be going back to your horrid hospitals," she said, with an air of the prettiest disdain.

"Who knows!" Camilla returned quietly

## CHAPTER XLV.

## DELAYS.

There is no great and no small  
To the Soul that maketh all ;  
And where it cometh, all things are ;  
And it cometh everywhere.

A WEEK later, Boisragon came again to see his wife. As he entered, Camilla heard him say to Sir Nigel :

" You must think me dilatory, Harland. But there is Arthur to be reckoned with. The boy has been going to the deuce. He's had a succession of worries. He heard lies in the village. He's off his balance. I don't want him to get another shock till his mind is a bit settled."

" Pray don't hurry," Sir Nigel returned.

Boisragon showed symptoms of his previous concern. He seemed unable to accustom himself to her changed appearance. He quitted the couch and passed from window to window of the room. He remarked upon the views of the Park. Presently he was chatting easily.

The invalid had lost all recollection of him. She opened her dull eyes and stared up apathetically at him.

She pushed out a hand and called his attention to a swollen finger. It was plain she was confusing him with Dr. Brattleton.

He lingered by the window in which Camilla sat at work. He divided his attention between her and an upland sweep of wood which showed from it. Suddenly he called up the room :

" It will be better, of course, Harland, when the change is

made that the invalid should retain the same attendants and nurses."

Sir Nigel came down the room like a whirlwind.

He glanced at Camilla's bent face. He glanced at Lord Boisragon eyeing it.

"That I must, of course, leave to them," he answered rather stiffly. "Benson, no doubt, and Nurse Hanson will do so. Miss Braeburn, owing I understand to family affairs, is resigning her position."

Camilla looked up quickly. In his eyes met rapiers. Boisragon's face fell.

"Oh," he said blankly. He sent Camilla an odd glance.

"Perhaps you will reconsider that decision, Nurse," he said. His voice was smooth. A smile, half-confident, intimate, unpleasant, overlaid his heavy features. "The Castle is pleasantly situated," he added.

Camilla did not look at Sir Nigel. She had an impression of a sudden tigerish rage in him.

"It is very good of you," she answered quietly. "But as Sir Nigel says, I have made other arrangements."

His lordship's face showed a further fall. The unpleasant smile began to creep away. He muttered something beneath his breath. It sounded like a disappointed acquiescence in the inevitable. He turned heavily on his heel and went down the room.

"Well," he said, "I'll be going. And as I say, I shall be grateful if you will stand a little more delay for Arthur's sake."

At the door his heavy eyes returned half abstractedly, significantly to Camilla.

She responded to them with a little ceremonious bend of the head in stiff farewell.

He went out quickly.

Some minutes later Sir Nigel, still a whirlwind, re-entered the room.

"His infernal impudence!" he exclaimed in a rage.

"Why did you decline a good position for me?" she chided him. "And without even consulting me!"

He remained speechless with indignation. Then he demanded:

"Do you mean to tell me you would for a moment have entertained that man's proposition?"

She lifted calm eyes to his irate ones.

"Why not?" she retorted. "'The Castle is pleasantly situated.'"

"You know nothing whatsoever about him."

"Do you suppose before a nurse accepts a position, she makes searching inquiries as to her employer's characteristics and temper?"

"Oh, temper!" he retorted lightly. "Temper is beside the question."

"Nevertheless, it might very seriously affect her comfort," she returned, with a tilted chin. "Because if it were fiery he might storm and scold her without cause."

"Without cause," he repeated angrily. "Do you call it without cause when she entertains for a moment the notion of entering such a man's house? Camilla, why do you annoy me by pretending you intended it?"

She smiled up sweetly.

"But did I not charm you by snubbing him? 'Thank your Lordship kindly,' I said, 'but as Sir Nigel mendaciously informs you, I have made other plans.' And this in spite of the pleasant situation of the Castle?"

He showed mollified.

"If you had said 'Yes,' I would have thrown him through the window."

"You have got your pronouns mixed, my dear," she teased him, "for surely it is I you should have thrown through the window if I had said 'Yes.'"

"You jest on a serious subject," he accused her. "You know nothing of the world."

"I am no such child. Why do you treat me as a child?"

"You are a child," he said, "so far as worldly knowledge is concerned." After a silence: "Don't complain that I treat you as a child. Do you not realise that I am old enough to be your father? In my complexity of feelings for you, Camilla, there is a tender little vein of the paternal."

He smiled whimsically. "I love you as a sister, as a brother, as a mother, as a father—as a lover—most of all as a lover, Camilla."

After a pause he resumed in a tone of irony.

"Do I appear to you an old fool, an elderly beau, middle-age playing the Romeo? You shake your head. But for all your emotion you are very critical and clear-sighted. And sometimes I am chagrined to think my Camilla's eyes are on my wrinkles and grey hair."

"You are not old," she cried exultantly. "With your spirits and idealism you are the youngest person I have ever met. I would not have a wrinkle less. Are there wrinkles? To me the grey (there is not much) is only priceless wisdom. I am a woman. Do you think a youth could satisfy me? If you were a year younger you would not be wise enough nor clever enough nor interesting enough to fill my heart—such an exacting person am I."

He smiled gently. But there was dejection in his face.

"The flattery is sweet," he said. "I allow you to delude my commonsense. Yet there is rubbish talked of love, dear. There is no age, as is supposed, for love. Love makes us young again. Camilla, have you heard it said that a flame which merely scorches the green wood—consumes the dry," his voice dropped to a whisper—"consumes, dear?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Camilla returning from a visit to the Treherne's, at a curve in the Pentagel drive, saw Lord Boisragon walking ahead of her.

She slackened her pace, not wishing to come up with him. Some telepathic flash impelled him to look back. Seeing her, he stopped, inspected the hedge, loitered so unmistakably that she could not without significance avoid overtaking him.

He raised his hat. He shot her a sidelong glance.

She bowed and would have passed on. But he moved up beside her.

"I am going to the house to call," he said in his throaty voice. "Do you know if I shall find Sir Nigel in?"

She was unable to say. Again she was moving on. But he kept beside her.

"I have decided that your patient shall be moved to the Castle as soon as it can be arranged," he said. "I am going

now to tell Sir Nigel my decision. There is, I suppose, no reason why she should not be brought to-morrow or the next day?"

"It could scarcely be so soon," Camilla said, with a little dismay. She added: "There are a number of things to arrange and to pack. Dr. Brattleton will have to be consulted. An ambulance must be procured."

"Oh, well," he said carelessly, "in a few days, then—within, let us say, a week."

Camilla walked on in silence. Her mind was busy. She reflected upon the invalid's inordinate wardrobe, upon the thousand and one things contingent upon the change.

She reflected with consternation that she likewise would have arrangements to make. The departure of her charge involved her departure also. She could not remain at Pentagel when a nurse would be no longer needed there. His announcement came as a shock.

It filled her with pain. To think even of quitting Pentagel was a sword-thrust through her heart. She had so rooted in the lovely place. She had set fond and clinging tendrils into every nook and cranny, as the ferns and mosses of its grey old walls had done.

Lord Boisragon interrupted her reflections. Beneath his heavy lids he had been watching her face.

"You will not so soon perhaps have made your arrangements," he said, with ceremony, "nor have I yet found anybody to take your place. I shall be obliged if you will accompany your patient to the Castle, and remain as long as it is convenient to you."

She remembered Sir Nigel's protest. She smiled to herself. She was by no means the child he supposed. Lord Boisragon and his possible attentions did not alarm her in the least. But she had no intention of running counter to Sir Nigel's wishes, seeing that he felt so strongly on the subject.

"Thank you," she said civilly. "It is very good of you. I am sorry I must refuse. You will have no difficulty at all in getting another nurse. A telegram will bring one by the next train."

He saw she was not to be persuaded.

His manner changed. He became at once impersonal.

Despite his rough life, he retained some of the instincts of his class.

The main difference between a well-bred and an under-bred man is to be found in the respective attitude of each toward women. A well-bred man quickly perceives and withdraws attentions he has found to be unpleasing. An under-bred man finds sport in continuing such.

Sir Nigel sought Camilla later in the sick-room.

"Boisragon was here to-day," he told her. "He has decided upon removing his wife as soon as it can be arranged. I will see Benson in the morning and make the first brief explanations to the household."

\* \* \* \* \*

But when the morning came, Benson had passed beyond the province of instruction and explanation.

Nurse Hanson came horrified to Camilla's room to inform her that she had found the poor woman dead in her bed. She had complained of faintness during the night, Miss Hanson, owing to a fit of obstinacy on the invalid's part, having been compelled to rouse her. She had afterwards returned to bed, the nurse first insisting upon giving her a restorative, as she looked and seemed extremely ill. Miss Hanson had gone in early to learn how she was. She had found her lying with her head upon an arm, as though she had passed away quietly in her sleep.

Camilla, grieved and shocked, rose at once and dressed.

"Heart-failure," Dr. Brattleton recorded. "She ought, of course, to have given up long ago. But one might as well have talked to a stone wall, poor thing!"

She was buried with every mark of respect; Sir Nigel himself was one of her bearers. In the church he erected a tablet to her memory, setting forth her faithful and loyal services.

A week before her death she had made a will leaving her savings to Lewis.

The invalid showed no other symptom of noting her absence further than in being extra solicitous for some days in her choice of gowns. She was in a manner sensitive to outward impressions, responding to unwonted agitations of the household by exacting more attention to her dress. For the rest, Benson's absence did not trouble her.

Of late she had preferred Camilla's ministrations to all others. Camilla was now tasked hardly. Four new maids were tried before one she would tolerate was found. The last she suffered with a bad grace.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

### THE GODS.

"The world is Allah's school, and Allah has many schoolmasters, and the name of one is Love. . . . If you can show me one who loves and continues to love, without hope of reward, or the joy of meeting—one, in fine, who does his work and asks no wages, and learns his lesson and demands no reward, then indeed you have found a true scholar of Love."

*—From the Persian.*

We are told that when the gods arrive they act quickly. The gods now began to act quickly. Benson's death again postponed the sick woman's removal.

Lord Boisragon wrote insisting upon it that there should be no further loss of time. He fixed a date ten days later for his wife's conveyance to the Castle. The delays harassed him, he said. The thing was getting on his nerves.

The exposure would be horrible. Their affairs would be on everybody's tongue. But as it was inevitable, the sooner it were done and done with, the better.

Yet two days later he wrote begging a month's respite. He renewed his old plea. It was for Arthur's sake. At present he had not found the courage to tell him. The boy was not himself. He had worries of his own. The shock might have a serious effect upon him. He had always thought so highly of his mother. He dreaded the reality for him.

Sir Nigel replied that a final decision must be arrived at, and a definite date arranged. He could not allow further procrastination. A fortnight from that date he would have Lady Boisragon transferred to her husband's house.

Arthur, in a state of concern, sought him next day.

"Father was frightfully upset by a letter he received from you, Sir," he said. "What is going on? There seems to be something on his mind. He stares and talks to himself. I'm afraid sometimes his brain must be affected. He takes more brandy than he should."

The young man was changed. He looked older and haggard. There were lines of dissipation in his face.

"Your father has been worried about you," Sir Nigel told him sternly. "Arthur, I'm disappointed in you."

He dropped his head like a chidden child.

"Every young man must have a bit of a fling," he protested lamely.

"So every young fool thinks. When he is older he realises at what cost," Sir Nigel returned.

A week later the morning post brought him a letter. He recognised Boisragon's loose, scrawling hand.

He shook a determined head above it. "I will have no more delays," he said to himself as he opened it.

But the gods were moving quickly. Before he had read through half of it, he rose with an agitated face and rang the bell. When the servant came he ordered his horse to be immediately brought round. Then he finished reading the letter.

*"Between this and the morning when you will get my letter,"* it ran, *"I shall probably have taken a decisive step. I say probably, because I am so bothered I can't answer for my actions from one hour to another. The situation is intolerable. As the time approaches I feel it is more than I can face. I daren't think of Arthur when I show him his mother. How can I tell the Boy what I told you? If I'm not there he may feel more kindly to me. These last weeks have been hell. I haven't slept. I almost live on brandy."*

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later.

*"I feel calmer. Arthur has been kind, his old self. After all, perhaps he would take it easily. I can see he has never believed the story I told him. He still believes himself illegitimate, and sometimes hates me for it. The truth would*

*hurt him less than this. Perhaps after all I shall not do what I intended. I don't know. All my life I have found it useless to make up my mind to a thing. When the time comes I act because I can't help it."*

*An hour later.*

*"Be a good friend to the Boy, and don't put me in the worst light to him. Some of it he will condone. He is young himself. It is the lie in the newspaper he won't overlook. I see it now a blackguard act, I can't tell him that. But you must, Harland, in fairness to her. He'll probably never forgive me. But in fairness to her you must tell him everything."*

Sir Nigel read the letter twice. Then he went to the fireplace, struck a match and set a light to it. He watched it burn on the tiled hearth. It writhed as though in pain. The paper blackened, the writing whitened. The words stood out like ghosts of the writer's loose, large hand. He set a boot upon the charred mass, and ground it to powder.

Then he went downstairs and waited on the steps until a groom brought round his horse. The butler came running after him.

"Shall I keep breakfast for you, Sir?" he inquired, with a perplexed face.

Sir Nigel had a foot in the stirrup. He did not appear to hear. But like a man in a dream he turned.

"Breakfast," he repeated. "Oh, no," he said, and galloped off.

Halfway down the drive he met a man running. He recognised him as a labourer on the Castle estate. He saw by his scared face that the worst had happened.

He drew rein and called to him:

"Do you want me?"

"It's his lordship, your honour," the man gasped. "Cut his throat an hour ago."

"Mr. Arthur?" Sir Nigel asked.

"Never spoke a word since, your honour," the man said with starting eyes.

Sir Nigel galloped on.

"This is a bad business, Sharpe," he addressed the old butler.

"Shocking, Sir Nigel." His eyes streamed. He choked.

"Where is Mr. Arthur?"

"His lordship's in the library."

"Mr. Arthur?" Sir Nigel said.

"Yes, Sir," the man returned.

Sir Nigel smiled grimly. The old lord had cut his throat. The young lord was in the library.

He remained a half minute in thought. Then he said:

"Ask him to come to me here."

Sharpe showed surprise. But he proceeded on the mission.

The moment he had disappeared, Sir Nigel turned and walked quietly round the house. He approached the library window cautiously.

He drew back. Through it he had seen Arthur on his way to the door. His back was to the window.

It was a close, damp morning. But the long French windows leading upon the lawns had not been unbolted. Rapidly Sir Nigel tried one and then another. Finding all resist, he lifted a boot and thrust it through a pane, high up where the hasp was.

The glass fell with a crash, some outside on the grass, some into the room. Acting with rapid precision he put a hand through the opening, unbolted and opened the window.

Losing no moment of time he strode across to Boisragon's writing-table. With ready resource he caught up as he went a heavy arrow-head. Without a pause, though with difficulty, he prised open the drawer in which he had seen Boisragon place the marriage-certificate.

The suspense on his face as he stooped to examine the contents amounted to anguish.

It lightened. He drew out the age-stained envelope with its broken seals. The little shoe came with it. It fell unheeded on the floor. He satisfied himself at a glance that the envelope contained what he wanted.

He placed it in his breast-pocket. Then he noiselessly closed the drawer, crossed the room, replaced the arrow-head on the table and went out by the window.

He walked round the house by the way he had come.

Arthur, with red eyes and a ghastly face, appeared approaching down the path. Sir Nigel advanced and took him kindly by a hand.

"Poor lad!" he said, in a tone of profoundest sympathy.  
"Poor lad!"

"Isn't it terrible?" Arthur faltered. He shook from head to foot. "My God, why did he do it?"

Sir Nigel, still holding his hand, drew him forward.

"Let us go in by the library window," he said.

"It's broken," Arthur commented blankly when they came to it.

"I broke it getting into the room," Sir Nigel explained.  
"They told me you were here."

No further heed was paid to it. Arthur went over, and seating himself in his father's chair, stretched his arms forward on the desk, and buried his head in them.

Sir Nigel left him quiet for a while. He looked up presently. His eyes were dry and burning.

"I'm blaming myself," he said. "It was all my fault. It was I who drove him to it. I never thought he'd care. I've only been going a bit wild. He always said it didn't matter."

Sir Nigel crossed the room and set a hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't blame yourself," he said sadly. "You were not the cause. There was something on his mind. He told me about it. Your follies had nothing to do with it."

"Of course, I know I'm not legitimate," Arthur said, hanging his head. "I shall have to turn out and everyone will know."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Sir Nigel said, "you are your father's lawful heir. You will inherit everything."

"So he said," Arthur returned tonelessly, "but it can't be proved. The church registers were destroyed."

"The marriage certificate is in my possession," Sir Nigel said.

Arthur started up. "For God's sake don't deceive me, Sir," he cried hoarsely. "I'm prepared for the truth. I'd better know it at once."

"I have told you the truth," Sir Nigel said. "All I have said can be proved."

A gleam of joy lit the poor youth's miserable face. Then he dropped his head on his arms again.

"My poor, dear father! He wasn't deceiving me then," he cried, in a burst of grief.

Sir Nigel left him. He first begged him to return and take up his quarters for a time at Pentagel. He was pleased that the young man declined.

"No," he said, "I'll stop with him to the last. He was the best of fathers. If only I could have him back again!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir Nigel saw his poor friend for a minute. The doctor had been there. All that was possible had been done to conceal the terrible evidences of violent death. The heavy white face was peaceful and composed. Sir Nigel noted pitifully that the poor man wore the gentle look his face had always taken when he spoke of Arthur.

After the funeral Sir Nigel had a painful interview with the next-of-kin. He had no alternative but to show him the marriage certificate, and to disclose the circumstances.

He was an old acquaintance. He gave his word of honour that no word should pass his lips. He did not attempt to conceal his disappointment. Since the death, which had placed Talbot Colville in possession, he had regarded himself as the certain successor unless (as seemed improbable) Lord Boisragon should marry, and an heir should be born to him.

Having discharged to the full his obligations to his friends, Sir Nigel was free at last to consider his own affairs. He returned home and locked himself into the library.

I dare not follow him there. The abandonment of a strong and good man to his grief is at once too terrible and too sacred for intrusion.

## CHAPTER XLVII.

### A WEDDING.

Thine were the calming eyes  
 That round my pinnace could have stilled the sea,  
 And drawn thy voyager home, and bid him be  
 Pure with their pureness, with their wisdom wise,  
 Merged in their light, and greatly lost in thee.

CAMILLA was summoned to the library. She went in a flutter of surprise and emotion, leaving the patient with Mrs. Merritt and the new maid.

With a little happy impulse of vanity she found time to run up to her room to tie her cap-strings in a prettier bow.

Joyous, she laid a hand upon the latch. Having lingered a half minute in which to still tumultuous heart-throbs, she went in.

He stood in the middle of the room, grave and silent. His eyes were on the door. Her leaping heart sank like a drowned thing in her body, when she saw what she saw in his face.

She ran to him with eager feet. "Oh, are you well? Are you well?" she cried, holding out her hands.

He caught her to him. He held her in such an embrace as a man dying and parting in a long finality from all he holds dear in the world would give—had he but heart and strength.

He said nothing. He only kissed and kissed her. She felt his muscles strain. She was gripped as with bands of steel. His lips and breath were chilled.

Her strength ebbed in his grasp. She froze in his arms.

A sob seemed to rise up out of the bowels of the earth and shake them as they stood. His lips were smitten asunder by one terrible sigh.

Then he set her away, still holding her hands. He lifted the hands and sealed them with kisses. He bound her again to him with bonds of steel. Again she was encompassed by his mortal agony. Again she froze and swooned against his pulseless heart.

Then he set her for ever away.

"It was too good," he gasped between his dry lips. The words came with a shrill whistling sound like the wind blowing over a tomb.

He looked in her face with terrible eyes—eyes frost-bound and opaque.

"My Camilla," he said hoarsely, "it was too good to last. Such joy never reaches fruition. Heaven comes not to earth."

She took his cold hands. She held them against the warmth of her throbbing breast. She smiled bravely into his face.

"It does—it shall," she cried, "since you love me and I love you."

She thought Lord Boisragon's death had shocked and unnerved him.

She laid a tender, caressing palm along his cheek.

He shook his head. His eyes strained upon her as though they were retaining tears of blood.

"Ah, my Beloved, my Beloved!" he said faintly.

"You are not well," she cried, forcing a playful gaiety into her voice. "You shall be nursed and cared for by your Camilla. For what other purpose has she passed her life in hospitals? That terrible death has been too much for you."

He eyed her strangely.

"You are right," he said tensely, "it has been too much for me. In short, Camilla, it has played the very devil with me."

She drew near and nestled a warm cheek against his pulseless heart. She chafed his cold hands.

"Soon you will be better," she said. "You shall see what a good nurse your Camilla is."

Suddenly he cast off her hands. Gently he set her away. "We cheat ourselves," he said. "That which must be done is better done at once."

She looked into his face.

"What is it?" she cried, from the depths of her soul. "There is something wrong."

"Yes," he said, "there is something wrong. There is everything wrong. The very force of gravity is a flaming lie since it supports a world that sundered me and my Camilla. Did I not tell you ours is a fool system?"

"Oh," she cried passionately. "We will not be sundered. Nothing shall keep us apart."

"Yet 'nothing' will," he said. "A wretched form. The infinitely little that makes all the difference between heaven and hell."

"Tell me what you mean. I know of nothing that has happened. I cannot think what it is you mean."

He seemed surprised.

"Are you serious?" he said. "Is it possible you do not realise?"

"I realise nothing that can affect our love for one another. His death was horrible—shocking. But what was he to me—to you? How can it make any difference?"

He still seemed surprised, almost as though he were not sure of her sincerity.

"Don't you see it makes all the difference, Camilla? You must see, dearest. If he had lived he would have claimed her as his wife. I was powerless. She belonged to him. His death leaves me no alternative but to make her my wife."

She cried out like one struck.

"Monstrous! Monstrous!"

"Monstrous," he assented, "and yet inevitable. She has passed as my wife for more than twenty years. In honour and justice I must make her so."

Her face grew sick. She reeled as she stood.

"She knows nothing. She feels nothing," she cried. "What can it be to her? Oh, you are mad, wicked to think of such a thing."

"I am in honour bound," he said. "I am surprised that my Camilla does not see I am in honour bound."

"She deceived you. Dearest," she added pitifully, "have you not more than kept your bond?"

"Not till I have paid to the uttermost farthing."

"Our love is as high and as golden as the stars. How shall a mere social form set us apart?"

He smiled dejectedly.

"We have not reached the stars," he said. "And in our world of little things, we must do the little thing that comes to our hand. We must keep the fool ordinances of our fool system!"

She began to sob bitterly. There was that in his face which told her his decision was irrevocable.

"Poor soul! Poor soul!" he said in spent tones.

"Yes, your poor Camilla," she sobbed passionately.

"It is my poor Camilla," he said in a voice which seared her heart, "that makes the hardest part of it."

She went to him then with exalted eyes. She clung about him. She forgot his poor Camilla. She thought only of her poor Beloved. Her lips, her hands, every fibre of her body seemed suddenly to pour forth balm and peace and healing for his wounds.

"I will not say another word," she told him in a voice of inspiring tenderness. "All that my Beloved does is right."

His fire was gone. He was cold and ashen pale. He was utterly spent. All night long he had wrestled, and not until morning had he thrown his devils.

In the after life her dearest solace was the memory of some minutes of tender and inspiring comfort she was able to afford him.

They made their future tryst.

"In the next life, dear," he told her, "I shall search for you among the Stars."

\* \* \* \* \*

She was present while the parson read the service. The door was locked and only they three knew.

Sir Nigel had seen the Bishop, and explained an informality in the first ceremony.

The invalid, with that perception she always showed of something unwonted, had selected her gayest attire. When

the ring was passed upon her finger, she struck and moaned and beat the air. The clergyman strove to conceal his shocked expression, while he mechanically hurried through his task. But he went through it faithfully, finally forbidding any man to set asunder those whom God had joined together.

When it was over he rolled up his surplice, stuffed it into his bag, and went out quickly.

---

## CHAPTER XLVIII.

## THE TRYST.

That was not you I saw with wool upon your eyelids and a linen band across your mouth. That was not you we lowered with thin cords into a hole. That we all know was not you. But the quick Spirit, so radiant with visible flame.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was so much easier to think of you setting out from star to star, or pacing up and down the perilous front of embattled spirits as I have seen you pace on earth.

A WEEK later Camilla returned to the Hospital. Sir Nigel had begged her to allow him to settle upon her such a sufficiency as would free her of all necessity to work. Gently, but firmly, she refused.

"Thank God for work," she said. "*To labour and to be content with that a man hath is a sweet life,*" she quoted, with a brave smile.

He completed the saying :

"*But he that findeth a treasure is above them both.* What of him who has found and loseth, my Camilla?" he added poignantly.

"We cannot lose," she maintained gently. "Every word you have given me, every look and touch is laid up where the moth corrupteth not and the thief cannot enter."

"Ah, dear," he said, ruefully. "How beautiful I thought to make your life!"

He stood with bared head at her departure. He shook hands with her, and regretted her going in the presence of them all. Only she caught his whispered :

"At the Stars, Camilla!"

"At the Stars," she promised, under her breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

She heard at intervals from Nurse Hanson. All went as before. The invalid was well. The procession of nurses had begun again. They found the patient trying. The maids remained no longer than a month. Neither Benson nor Miss Braeburn had been replaced.

Cicero was himself. He had seemed happier since she had found a mate for him. There was a family of little Ciceros, the sweetest little pets, with darling tails. She would spare one of the little strangers if Camilla wished for it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mrs. Drummond wrote. She was quite out of patience with Camilla for deserting her delightful post at Pentagel, where she had appeared to be so happy, and where everybody thought so much of her. She felt for a long while too vexed ever to see her again. But as Nesta was shortly to be married to a German Prince (immensely wealthy), and would live for the most part abroad, she would be glad to have her (Camilla) to stop with her sometimes. By the way, had she heard that young Lord Boisragon was going to marry Gwendolen Treherne. She should always regret as things had turned out that Nesta had refused him. But they had been misled in certain matters. She did not mind telling Camilla in confidence, she believed he was the only one of her admirers for whom Nesta had cared a straw.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Nurse Braeburn," Doctor Hawker greeted her. "I am sorry to see you here again. As I told you, the work is too hard. Have you forgotten I told you that if you continue it in all human probability"—the same hiatus, the same spread of the hands.

She regarded him with shining eyes. "I remember," she said quietly.

He bent his head and passed into the ward.

He was a man of heart and sympathy—the true physician. And he knew that the human probability he implied had lost its terrors.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they wrote to her that he was dead they told her merely that she knew. Love laughs at distance. Science chains the lightning flash to bear its messages. Love makes its own lightning flashes.

No morning dawned that she did not awaken to lips that kissed her across a long day's journey. No night fell that she was not folded into arms three hundred miles away. Not a day but brought that sudden sacred stillness, which, for the space of minutes, isolated her and him from all the world.

He did not write. But she knew that his strength was failing. She remembered his words :

*"The flame which but scorches the green wood, consumes the dry—consumes, dear."*

In his last illness, through the delirium of fevered nights, her mind strayed linked with his. In the mornings her strength failed to his exhaustion.

He died with his arms outstretched to her.

When his heart broke it was like the breaking of a vase of precious essences. Her senses were steeped in a supernal fragrance. Her room was filled with a celestial singing.

A voice thrilled in her ear: "*At the Stars, Camilla, at the Stars!*"

THE END.

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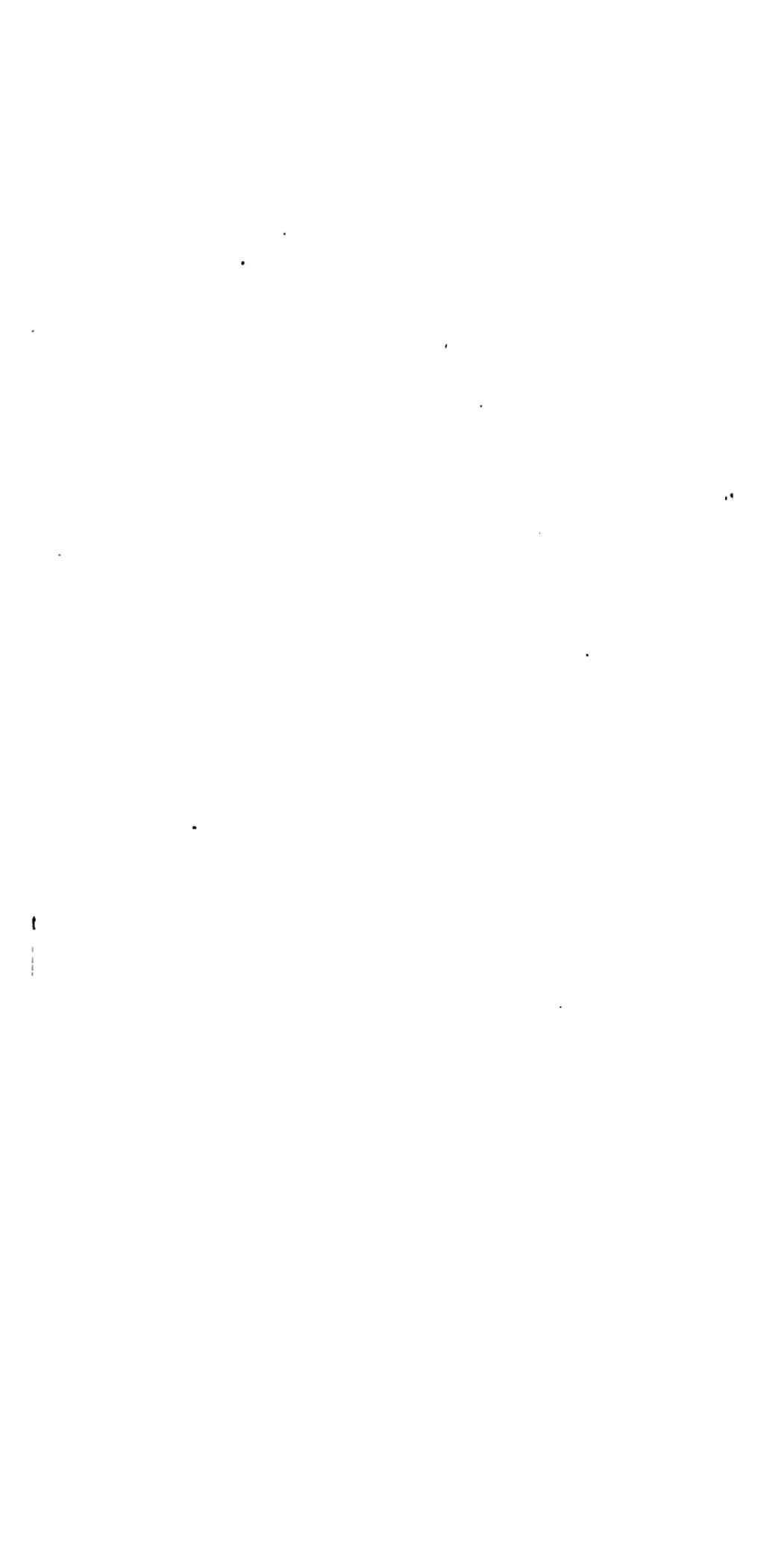
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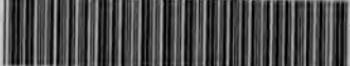
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